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# **What Is the Penny Buying for South Carolina?**

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**Twenty-Third Annual Reporting on  
the South Carolina Education  
Improvement Act of 1984**

**Evaluation of Selected South Carolina  
Alternative Education Programs:  
Findings and Recommendations of the  
National Dropout Prevention Center/Network,  
Clemson University**

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**South Carolina State Board of Education  
December 2007**



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Center/Network, Clemson University**

**Evaluation Section  
Office of Data Management and Analysis  
South Carolina Department of Education**

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**December 2007**

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## Preface

In 1984, the South Carolina General Assembly enacted the Education Improvement Act (EIA) as a means of reforming South Carolina's system of public education. The EIA increased the South Carolina sales tax by a penny in order to fund a variety of programs targeted to increase student achievement; improve the teaching and testing of basic skills; enhance teacher training, evaluation, and compensation; improve school leadership; implement quality controls and reward productivity; create more effective partnerships; and provide school buildings conducive to learning. In addition to providing program funds, EIA monies are also used to pay for program evaluations conducted by entities outside the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE). The use of EIA funds for program evaluations is detailed in the 2006–07 Appropriation Act (Section 1A.22), which calls for EIA funds to be used by the SCDE to “support its contracted program evaluations.”

This edition of *What Is the Penny Buying for South Carolina?* provides the results of the evaluation of the alternative school program in South Carolina that was conducted from March 1, 2007, to June 30, 2007, by Clemson University's National Dropout Prevention Center/Network.

## **Executive Summary and Recommendations**

This evaluation examined selected alternative schools and programs across South Carolina to gain an understanding of program best practices and effectiveness based on research-based analysis of existing data, direct observation of program operations, and interviews with students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The evaluation was not designed to be a comprehensive analysis of alternative school programs in South Carolina or the programs selected for site visits. The findings and subsequent recommendations are based on a one-day “snapshot” into the operations of each school visited by developing an understanding of the schools’ climate and culture, the strength and competence of faculty and staff, the philosophical construct with regard to student interaction, and some minimal measure of outcome impact.

The alternative schools selected for review were chosen by the SCDE as potential exemplary schools that could serve as research-based best practice models for other alternative schools in the state. The findings revealed that, in many cases, alternative school programs are vastly underdeveloped in terms of exploiting the program’s potential for student recovery and re-engagement in the learning process. Although each program had strengths and pillars to build on to improve the program, each program also had identified weaknesses that prohibited real growth opportunities for the students as well as minimized opportunities for the staff to be creative in their instructional practices. The overriding philosophy of alternative education at most of the sites visited appears to be punitive in nature and very restrictive. Students have little or no choice in their attendance at the school, the buildings are typically the oldest in the district and not very inviting, and there is often an absence of rigor and relevance within the curriculum. Also, there appears to be an over-reliance on computer-based instruction that diminishes verbal interaction and social skill development, and is generally reported by students to be boring and not very challenging.

There is a definite need to re-think and re-structure alternative education programs and practices in South Carolina based on research-based best practice, as well as anecdotal evidence from stakeholders of what truly works for students in alternative settings. When developed appropriately, alternative education can indeed be a breeding ground of discovery regarding effective practice for all students and serve to lead educators toward a process of re-thinking about the role and function of educational options in South Carolina.

Based upon these findings, the following recommendations are provided in an effort to assist South Carolina’s alternative programs, like their students, in achieving success.

- A comprehensive transition process/program should be developed and implemented for students entering and exiting the school. Students enter many of the schools on a weekly basis. New students may disrupt the classroom if they have not been through a transition program. There must be established, written, consistently followed procedures for students to return to their home schools. It is important to have buy-in from all stakeholders involved in transition.

- The home schools need to provide support services to their students returning from the alternative schools. Students often return under a behavior contract, which puts them in contact with an assistant principal rather than a counselor.
- There should be an adult mentor for each alternative school student, especially for those returning to their home school. Many students thrive in the small alternative school setting, but get lost in the shuffle when they return to a large school. An adult mentor, a school staff or community member, would provide the one-on-one attention that they need. This should be a formal program with a training workshop for the mentors.
- A formal, two-way, on-going communication process between the alternative school and the home school needs to be developed and implemented. Informal communication is used extensively, but is not always effective in gleaning the necessary information.
- Alternative schools should have access and be networked to all pertinent statistical district computer databases to ensure the timely transfer of information.
- Funding for alternative schools is not always adequate. Alternative schools need an established and consistent budget in order to provide necessary resources and plan for the future.
- The textbook supply is often inadequate. Textbooks should follow students to the alternative school.
- Incentives should be provided for teachers working in alternative schools. Many teachers said that teaching in an alternative school is their calling or mission, but extra pay would be welcome. Some of the schools have a difficult time hiring experienced, qualified teachers. All teachers should have a planning period and a lunch break.
- Curricula should be improved and enhanced with electives such as physical education and art available at all alternative schools. There were numerous comments about the creativity of the students and the need to offer art classes as an outlet for their creativity. Many of the students listed physical education as the course they would most like to have added. Students often have an abundance of energy that makes it difficult to sit still in class. Physical exercise is a positive way to release this pent up energy.
- Career education should be integrated into the curriculum. Each school should have a job coach and apprenticeship opportunities. Students expressed interest in training in carpentry, welding, cosmetology, masonry, and health care work. The Education and Economic Development Act should apply to alternative schools and improve access to career education.
- Schools should have a specific budget to implement a comprehensive guidance program. Many of the schools reviewed had a counselor to student ratio of 1:250. Alternative school students are often dealing with a myriad of issues which require intensive counseling. It is difficult for counselors to meet the needs of their students.

- Improved methods of transportation for students should be investigated and implemented. Students reported bus rides of two hours or more. Multiple bus routes entail multiple dismissal times which disrupt the last period of the day.
- Alternative schedules to the typical 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. school day should be investigated and implemented. Evening schedules allow students to work during the day and still earn their diploma. Also, research suggests that teenagers are more productive when school starts later in the day.
- Mastery learning needs to be implemented instead of seat time. It is difficult for students who are deficient in credits to make up credits if mastery learning is not the basis for completion of a course.
- The state should explore the development of regional residential alternative schools. Many students live in deplorable conditions: little or no parental supervision, lack of proper nutrition, shootings in their neighborhoods, threats from gangs, and drug pushers. It is difficult to overcome all of these challenges during a school day when the students return to these neighborhoods when school is out.
- Strategies for increased home and community involvement should be explored and implemented. One of the greatest needs is mentors for students. This need could be met by community volunteers.
- More comprehensive professional development for alternative schools should be offered through the SCDE at regional venues. Classroom management, teaching methodologies, and divergent learners are a few of the topics suggested by teachers. (The evaluators note that statewide training has been provided in the following areas the past four years: Classroom Management, Differentiated Instruction, Working with At-Risk Students, Student Discipline, and Alternative School Teacher Roundtable Meetings. This recommendation addresses the need teachers identified for regional trainings.)
- Strategies for increasing parental involvement should be explored and implemented. Several schools have successful strategies that could be emulated by other schools.
- Strategies for increasing community involvement should be explored and implemented. Alternative schools often have a negative image because their assets are not promoted.
- The state's virtual high school should be available in all alternative schools serving high school students. This would enable students to take classes that are not offered by the alternative school. Students may prefer the virtual high school over NovaNet.



## Introduction

Clemson University through the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N), College of Health, Education, and Human Development, was selected to serve as the external evaluator for the SCDE Alternative School Evaluation Project for the period from March 1, 2007 to June 30, 2007. The purpose of this project was to identify the best practices and essential elements of effectiveness in selected South Carolina alternative schools. Mrs. Aveene Coleman of the SCDE identified eleven alternative school programs to participate in the project. The NDPC/N research team spent one day at each of ten schools. (Due to logistical difficulties and time restraints it was not possible to complete a site visit at the Alternative Academy for Success in School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties.) The site visits enabled the team to get a snapshot of the programs. An in-depth evaluation of the individual sites was not the purpose, but rather, the development of a composite picture of an effective alternative school and the identification of best practices at individual schools.

The participating programs and the districts they serve were

- Alternative Academy for Success (School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties),
- Alternative Learning Center (Lexington County School District One),
- Anderson County Alternative Program (Anderson School Districts One through Five),
- Blythewood Academy (Richland School District Two),
- Eastside Academy (Lancaster County School District),
- Givhans Alternative Program (Dorchester School District Two),
- Greenville Alternative School Program (Greenville County School District),
- Phoenix Academy (Rock Hill School District Three of York County),
- Sonovista School (Darlington County School District)—name changed to Darlington County Intervention School,
- Spartanburg County Alternative Program (Spartanburg County School Districts One through Six), and
- York One Academy (York School District One)

The NDPC/N evaluation team interviewed directors or principals, administrative assistants or assistant principals, program coordinators, teachers, guidance counselors, staff, and students. Parents, teachers, and students were also surveyed. Interview and survey questions were drawn from the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network's Program Assessment and Review (PAR) process. The Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools Type 1 evaluation instrument was used as a checklist of best practices. The ten indicators or best practices on the instrument are: Student Accountability Measures, Administrative Structure and Policies, Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty and Staff, Facilities and Grounds, School Leadership, Student Support Services, Learning Community, Program Funding, and School Climate (see Appendix A for complete checklist).

The overall evaluation was designed as a follow-up to the initial study of alternative school programs in South Carolina that was published in the *What Is the Penny Buying for South Carolina?: Sixteenth Annual Report on the Education Improvement Act of 1984* (South Carolina State Board of Education 2000). More specifically, the first-year evaluation of alternative school programs focused on collecting data that would accomplish five central objectives:

- Goal 1: To identify all alternative program sites in the state, regardless of their funding sources.
- Goal 2: To describe the program sites in terms of staff, students, and implementation of the statute.
- Goal 3: To determine how all allocated funds were expended.
- Goal 4: To identify problems experienced with operating alternative school programs.
- Goal 5: To identify issues for future study.

The 2000 report identified the following aspects of alternative school programs that warranted further investigation:

- staff development,
- program costs and per pupil expenditures,
- student success indicators,
- detailed information on student characteristics,
- the transition process into and out of the program,
- identification of best practices in school operation and structure,
- identification of best practices related to involving parents in their child's education, and
- local evaluations and annual reviews.

As a follow-up to the 2000 report, this evaluation specifically focused on the identification of best practices in school operation and structure; however, many of the other aspects of alternative school programs recommended for further investigation were also addressed through the lens of the Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools Type 1 instrument.

As external evaluator, the NDPC/N performed the following specific tasks.

1. Conducted data analysis using data captured by the NDPC/N evaluation team: on-site observations, review of existing records and documents pertinent to the operation of the program, various survey data, and data provided by the administrative staff of the selected alternative school programs.
2. Developed a Literature Review of alternative school best practices.
3. Compiled a final report reflecting alternative school best practices in South Carolina.

## Evaluation Design

The SCDE Alternative School Evaluation Project was focused more on program implementation and process rather than outcomes; however some quantifiable outcome data was identified and reported with respect to program effectiveness. The evaluation findings will be used as a tool to help inform the most effective alternative schools in South Carolina. As such, the evaluation mainly provides descriptive data about project activities and participant behaviors and attitudes. (See Appendix B for the Evaluation Design Logic Model.) The evaluation was designed to answer the following questions.

1. What alternative school programs are considered to be effective in South Carolina?
2. What are the characteristics of the identified effective alternative school programs?
3. What have been the effects of the programs on participants in the areas of  
student attendance,  
personal/social/emotional development,  
academic performance,  
grade retention,  
graduation rates,  
discipline,  
knowledge and understanding of potential career options, and  
college readiness.
4. What is the alternative school program's effectiveness, or impact, in relation to its purpose, goals, and objectives?
5. How effective are selected alternative school programs in relation to the Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools instrument?

## Components of the Evaluation Process

### Formative Evaluation Component

A formative component is essential to the evaluation. Ongoing documentation of activities, processes, and results enabled the NDPC/N to provide "Best Practices" data to the SCDE for similar programs to follow. The formative evaluation process provides program participants, including students, parents, and staff, opportunities for continuous involvement and process feedback.

### Summative Evaluation Component

The summative evaluation component examined evidence of the effects on students participating in the selected alternative school programs. However, it should be noted that outcome data were not thoroughly analyzed due to the time constraints of this evaluation and the capacity of the

evaluation team to secure baseline and current data sets needed for any type of thorough examination of impact at each program selected for this study.

### **Quantitative Evaluation Analyses and Data Sources**

The quantitative component of the evaluation was based on data provided from the selected alternative school records and data produced through use of survey instruments developed by NDPC/N. Unfortunately, the requested data sets were not consistently captured at each of the selected sites, which hampered any effort by the evaluation team to make definitive comments about outcome effectiveness or make program comparisons.

### **Evaluation Data Sources**

Qualitative data sources included

- notes and figures from direct observation by the NDPC/N evaluation team;
- staff, student, parent surveys;
- focus group responses; and
- interviews.

### **Evaluation Data Analysis and Distribution**

Where appropriate, formative impact data analysis will support immediate and timely programmatic changes as appropriate. The summative program evaluation report will be used to develop a composite picture of an effective alternative school and identify best practices at individual program sites, as appropriate.

## Review of Pertinent Literature

Alternative education or alternative schools are not really a new concept to the American scene. As early as colonial America, education was conducted in a variety of ways by the wealthy or by religious groups. State legislators have been supporting a wide range of schools for over a century. Although they may not be considered alternative schools by some, almost every state now has a theme-based governor's school for the arts, math, or science, and magnet schools are very common.

Dewey can be considered to be the father of the modern alternative school movement. He recognized the importance of individualized and experiential education because children do not have the same learning styles or skills. He encouraged educators to move from the "school as factory" approach to education to a more progressive school philosophy that looked at students as individuals.

The ferment of the 1960s in America produced a large number of alternative schools, founded for political or social reasons. These schools served mainly white, middle, and upper class children. Raywid (1994) reported that by 1981 there were approximately 10,000 public alternative schools serving three million students.

Koetke (1999) describes how these early educational experiments and experiences led to the two basic systems we have today. The two strands consist of educational opportunities "outside the system" and those "inside the system." Among the types of alternative school opportunities outside the system are the elite and costly private schools, religious schools, charter schools, and home schools. The alternative schools described by Koetke as inside the system are those that generally serve a special population, such as students with unique learning interests or disabilities, teenage parents, potential dropouts, violent individuals, or court-adjudicated youths and those in juvenile detention systems. These types of alternative schools attempt to keep students in school to earn their high school diploma or pass the General Educational Development (GED) exam. Most of the alternative schools today focus on serving at-risk youth.

Alternative education can be defined in many ways, but Morley (1991) provides a broad definition. He states, "Alternative education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur" (8). An important factor in alternative education is that all personnel recognize that all children do not learn in the same way, so varied instructional methods and an innovative curriculum are necessary. A supportive school climate is vital to success and this is achieved by teachers, parents, students, and community members demonstrating positive attitudes (Bucci and Reitzammer 1992).

The purpose of this review is to present an overview of alternative education, elements of successful alternative schools, and best practices for development and evaluation. It is important that educators and society as a whole recognize the importance of providing options for students who learn in different ways. If we believe that *all* children can learn, we have the obligation to discover how we can help them to learn.

Alternative schooling is one of the fifteen Effective Strategies identified by the NDPC/N for school improvement and dropout prevention. Alternative schooling provides the opportunity for students who are not successful in the traditional classroom to succeed and complete their education. If these options did not exist, many more students would drop out and would not become productive members of society. We must be mindful however, that even the most effective school-based reforms will not prevent all students from dropping out of school. About 20 percent of students drop out late in high school when they are relatively close to obtaining a degree (Neild and Belfanz 2006). Thus an effective system of credit recovery, second-chance schools, and alternative means of securing a high school diploma is required to address the needs of all students.

## **Need for Alternative Schools**

Every student should have the opportunity to learn and to achieve a quality of life they desire based on their educational efforts and achievements. If this statement is accepted as an educational goal, then alternative schooling is a requirement in every community, not an option. Alternative schooling opportunities are needed to accommodate the educational needs of students because the traditional school system, and particularly the traditional high school, can no longer serve their needs and their families' life styles common today. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison (2006) discovered in their research that while most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate, there are things they say schools can do to help them finish. Indeed, those "things" are embodied within an effective alternative school as documented in this literature review. Furthermore, many educators are revisiting Dewey's educational philosophy in developing educational programs. It has even been suggested that society might want to consider allowing students to drop out and then provide alternative schools for them to complete their GED (Dynarski 1999).

Alternative schooling does meet the diverse student and family needs and the social behaviors required for youth in today's world. Students in alternative learning programs are twice as likely to have parents who have less than a high school education, are more likely to live in single parent families, are more economically disadvantaged, and have repeated a grade, been suspended, or dropped out (Public Schools of North Carolina 2001, x).

Alternative education also offers school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide an equal access to education for all students. The most critical question that must then be answered is: What kind of alternative education should be designed and offered in our public schools? How can the alternative programs best meet the learning needs of students and be effectively integrated into the regular school system?

## **Types of Alternative Schools**

Alternative schools are not new to the educational community. It was not unusual in the 1950s and 1960s for school districts to have an alternative school. However, the schools in that era were established to serve students who had already dropped out of the regular school. These schools had little effect on the dropout rate and were closed as district budgets began to shrink in the 1970s.

Within the last twenty years there has been a rebirth of alternative schools that focus on the needs of at-risk students. The schools have as their purpose to keep students from dropping out of school by paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and the academic requirements for a high school diploma. Many educators realize that dropout prevention efforts must begin earlier than high school and now offer alternative school programs at the middle school level. A few districts even offer alternative programs at the elementary level. All of these programs are focused on providing students with the opportunity to succeed in school and graduate.

Magnet schools, designed to focus on specific subject areas such as math and science, the arts, or communication have been in existence for decades. Magnet schools are usually found in larger or urban school districts. Some of the oldest and best-known magnet school models are found in the New York City Public School System. There are over 200 magnet schools ranging from the performing arts, career and technical education, global studies, science and math, environmental science, to middle college. Another innovative model is the Key Elementary School, in the Indianapolis Public School System, where the curriculum emphasis is built around the theory of multiple intelligences developed by Howard Gardner (Bolanos 1994). Excellent models for magnet schools are the high schools, often residential, supported by each state. These are usually known as the Governor's School for the Arts, the Governor's School for Math and Science, or whatever the special subject area is in each state.

Present alternative schools are usually one facet of a school district's comprehensive program to serve at-risk students. Students attending these schools are usually underachieving, deficient in credits to graduate, or retained more than once (Schargel and Smink 2001). Some students are placed in these programs by the court system. Other alternative schools focus on a school-to-work curriculum, or are designed to meet the needs of teenage parents and provide day care and parenting programs.

Charter schools are a growing movement in the alternative education field. More than thirty states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation allowing charter schools to exist (Schargel and Smink 2001). The most recent review of charter schools by the U.S. Department of Education (2002) found that there were 1,010 charter schools operating in the school year 1999–2000 in twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia. There are 266,721 students currently served by the states with operating charter schools. According to Berman, et al. (1999), the most common reasons given for establishing charter schools were to realize an alternative vision of schooling and to gain autonomy from district and state regulations.

Researchers have identified numerous models of alternative schools that have been developed to serve local needs and are operating with varied degrees of success. Hefner-Packer (1991) has identified five models:

- The *Alternative Classroom* is a self-contained classroom within a traditional school that offers varied programs in a different environment.
- The *School-Within-a-School* is also housed within a traditional school, but has semi-autonomous or specialized educational programs.

- The *Separate Alternative School* is separated from the regular school and has different academic and social behavior programs.
- The *Continuation School* meets the needs of students no longer attending traditional schools. These may be street academies for job-related training or parenting centers.
- The *Magnet School* is a self-contained program offering an intensified curriculum in one or more subject areas such as science or the arts.

Chalker's (1996) four common settings for alternative education are quite similar to Hefner-Packer's:

- *Separate Alternative School* is a self-contained, isolated structure. These schools are increasingly providing services to chronically disruptive students and students involved in the criminal justice system.
- *School-Within-a-School* has strong ties to the parent school. Students usually attend the program for part of the day and still have access to regular school resources.
- *Continuation School* is usually an evening or summer program that serves students who are no longer enrolled in school or who need additional coursework. The purpose of these schools is to provide opportunities for students to obtain their high school diploma or pass the GED exam. These programs often have an additional goal of preparing students for work.
- *Alternative Classroom Settings* are self-contained classrooms in a traditional school. These classrooms vary from the traditional classroom in their instructional methods and structure.

Raywid (1994) provides another descriptive listing of popular alternative schools:

- *Schools of Choice* offer different specialized learning opportunities for students usually in a magnet school.
- *Last-Chance Schools* are designed to provide continued education options for disruptive students.
- *Remedial Schools* focus on the student's need for academic remediation or social rehabilitation.

The NDPC/N has developed a database of successful dropout prevention programs. The Model Programs Database contains descriptions of a wide variety of alternative schools located throughout the country. A selected review of these programs by Schargel and Smink (2001) found a large variety of organizational structures. Brief descriptions of these types are below:

- *Schools-Within-a-School* are established for students needing a separate location within the traditional school. They are usually housed in a separate wing with different staff, for academic or social behavior programs.
- *Schools Without Walls* are designed for students requiring educational and training programs. Services are delivered from various locations within the community and usually offer flexible student schedules.



- *Residential Schools* are for special case students, usually placed by the courts or the family, with special counseling and educational programs offered.
- *Separate Alternative Learning Centers* feature a special curriculum, such as parenting skills or unique job skills. They are in a separate location from the traditional school, many times located in business environments, churches, or remodeled retail centers with excellent transportation services.
- *College-Based Alternative Schools* use a college facility, but are intended for students needing high school credits and operated by public school staff. The college setting enhances the student's self-esteem and offers other services that benefit the student's growth.
- *Summer Schools* are either remedial for academic credits or enhance a student's special interests, perhaps in science, computers, etc.
- *Magnet Schools* focus on selected curriculum areas with specialized teachers and with student attendance usually by choice.
- *Second-Chance Schools* are for students who are judged to be troubled and placed in the school by the courts or the school district as a last chance before being expelled or incarcerated.
- *Charter Schools* are autonomous educational entities operating under a contract negotiated between the state agency and the local school sponsors. (115–116)

## Delivery Models

Just as there are many types and settings for alternative schools, there are a variety of delivery models. The schools may use one or more of these models depending on the students that they serve. Chalker (1996) has identified the following models:

- *School Transition* prepares students for return to their regular school or for graduation. This model also assists at-risk students in transitioning from elementary to middle school and middle to high school.
- *Behavioral Intervention* is helpful in teaching at-risk students the attending and survival skills needed for academic success.
- The *Academic* model is based on the belief that student behavior problems are rooted in learning difficulties that lead to the student's frustration with learning. As students become more successful academically, their behavior improves.
- The *Therapeutic* model focuses on assisting students in developing problem-solving skills and appropriate classroom behavior.
- The *Punitive* model uses punishment to deter or eliminate misbehavior. Proponents of this model believe that students deliberately cause trouble and misbehave.
- *Academic Intervention* uses a variety of instructional methods to respond to at-risk students' needs. Various ways to restructure the school to meet the diverse educational needs of at-risk learners are considered. Individualized instruction, instructional

technology, remedial, and pullout programs are some of the methods used to respond to learners' needs. A positive instructional environment is the hallmark of this mode.

- *Vocational Intervention* focuses on making school meaningful to students and preparing them for the work force. Part-time employment, entrepreneurial school-based programs, and support groups are some of the strategies used. External organizations and the business community often supply support for these programs.
- *School Continuation* serves those students with economic, family, or personal problems that interfere with their schooling. An example of this model is a school-based day care center for teenage mothers who want to obtain their high school diplomas.
- *Dropout Prevention* models use some or all of the fifteen "Effective Strategies" identified by the NDPC/N. The strategies are family engagement, early childhood education, early literacy development, mentoring/tutoring, service-learning, alternative schooling, after-school experiences, professional development, active learning, educational technology, individualized instruction, systemic renewal, school-community collaboration, career and technology education, and safe learning environments.
- *School Community Partnership* programs feature collaboration with the larger community. The resources of businesses, universities, and social agencies are used to resolve problems related to home environment and health. Community members may also play an important role as mentors to at-risk students (15–19).

The programs and models designed to meet the needs of at-risk students are as diverse as the students themselves.

## Needs and Issues

There are a variety of needs and issues that require consideration in alternative education (Public Schools of North Carolina 2000, 2001):

- Funding is an issue for all schools, but especially alternative education schools. One of the biggest expenses is transportation. Alternative schools are often not centrally located in the school district, which increases transportation costs. The per-student costs for alternative education are higher because of the lower teacher to student ratio. This sometimes leads to resentment by school district and community members.
- Accountability has become more accepted in recent years, overcoming the anti-evaluation attitudes common in the 1960s and 1970s. Many programs still do a poor job of tracking and evaluating student progress. Students often get lost as they are shuffled between the traditional school and the alternative school.
- Community relations are important because community members often do not understand the purpose of alternative schools. There needs to be a system of advocacy from the school district superintendent to the school board members on down. Community support is vital to workforce readiness programs and service-learning projects. Many students in alternative schools are concrete learners who need real-life experiences.

- Good communication between alternative and regular schools is vital for the student to be successful. Communication must be two-way, not just from the alternative school to the traditional school, or vice-versa. It is important to provide a transitioning bridge for personnel in the receiving schools, so that the progress of the students can be tracked.
- One size does not fit all and there should be a variety of alternatives available. Some students need academic assistance, others have behavior problems, and some are English as Second Language learners. A variety of programs often exist within the same building.
- Course offerings are frequently limited to the basic academic subjects of math, English, and science. The teaching staff is usually small, so it is difficult to offer a broader range of courses beyond the basics. Some schools use part-time teachers for enrichment courses.
- Alternative programs are often located in substandard buildings. It is unheard of for a new building to be constructed for an alternative school. Because the buildings are usually not centrally located in the district, students often have long bus rides of several hours to get to school.
- Program-specific professional development for teachers is an important issue. Most teachers in alternative schools report that their formal education did not prepare them to deal with at-risk students (Public Schools of North Carolina 2000, xxiii). Professional development activities must be different from those for regular teachers. Classroom management techniques, diversity training, and alternative instructional methods are some of the areas that are most often requested.

The relationship between the students' home school and the alternative school is important. Kellmayer (1995) suggests that the following areas often cause conflict and need to be considered:

- Credit awarding based on proficiency rather than the standard practice of seat time (as required to earn a Carnegie Unit) can cause conflict between the alternative school and the home school. How credits will be awarded should be worked out in advance of the alternative school's opening.
- Attendance policies should be flexible to meet the needs of the students. Many of these students are working or have family responsibilities that preclude them from attending school during the normal school day.
- Participation in extracurricular regular school activities should be considered on an individual basis.
- Discipline is the responsibility of the school principal. Many at-risk students have difficulty following traditional school rules, so it is important for the principal to have the flexibility to choose the most appropriate course of action.

## Alternative School Best Practices

The basic characteristics of alternative schools that are successful with students who do not prosper in traditional schools are derived from the research. It seems nearly impossible to boil down those educational practices; however, there does appear to be a consistent profile of characteristics common to the most successful schools. Schargel and Smink (2001) found that a successful alternative school has the following educational characteristics:

- maximum teacher-to-student ratio of 1:10,
- small student base not exceeding 250 students,
- clearly stated mission and discipline code,
- caring faculty with continual staff development,
- school staff having high expectations for student achievement,
- learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style,
- flexible school schedule with community involvement and support, and
- total commitment to have each student be a success. (117)

A number of other researchers in the field have identified similar characteristics of successful alternative education programs (Buchart 1986, Kadel 1994, Kellmayer 1995, Public Schools of North Carolina 2000, Raywid 1994).

The state of North Carolina (Public Schools of North Carolina 2001) conducted a longitudinal, in-depth evaluation of their alternative education programs spanning more than five years. Their findings are similar to those of other researchers. According to this report, successful alternative education schools have the following characteristics:

- strong sense of purpose and mission;
- caring and committed staff;
- dynamic leadership;
- collegiality with faculty and students;
- family-like atmosphere of respect;
- low teacher to student ratio that allows more individual attention;
- hands-on/experiential learning;
- individualized and personalized learning;
- address the emotional, physical, and academic needs of students;
- flexibility;
- focus on academic standards;
- creative strategies for course offerings;
- significant parent involvement; and
- strong community connections. (xi–xix)

A synthesis of the previous research resulted in the following elements characteristic of a successful alternative school:

- strong mission and sense of purpose;
- high expectations for student achievement;
- low teacher to student ratio that allows individual attention—with total enrollment not exceeding 250 students;
- individualized learning programs to meet the needs of the students;
- varied instructional strategies with an emphasis on active learning;
- high academic standards;
- holistic services to meet the emotional, physical, and academic needs of students;
- strong community involvement;
- caring and committed staff; and
- flexible schedule.

The NDPC/N has combined these essential elements and the needs identified in the North Carolina studies (Public Schools of North Carolina 2000, 2001) into ten categories:

- accountability measures,
- administrative structure and policies,
- curriculum and instruction,
- faculty and staff,
- facility and grounds,
- school leadership,
- student support services,
- learning community, and
- program funding.

These ten categories are the basis for an alternative school evaluation tool developed by the NDPC/N. This tool is described in Appendix A.

## **Establishing an Alternative Program**

There is a significant difference between understanding what the research says are the essential components of an effective alternative school program and the actual establishment of an alternative school program. From conception to completion, several important steps must be considered and implemented to ensure program success.

### **1. Establishing a Planning Team or Task Force**

Starting a school for students most at risk of school failure requires serious thought and commitment on the part of those selected to define it and bring about its implementation. It is not a task for those unwilling to make a significant contribution of their personal time and energy. Conventional wisdom and experience suggests that a team of six to fifteen people is the optimum number to serve on a planning committee or task force (Chalker 1996). Numbers beyond fifteen

become cumbersome to work with and may become splintered as time goes on. Conversely, a sub-group or powerful leader who wants to push through his or her own vision and agenda may sway a small group. Every effort should be made to ensure broad-based community support on the planning team. It is wise to start the planning process at least one year ahead of the start-up date for the opening of the school (Kellmayer 1995).

## **2. Determining a Philosophical Construct and Mission for the School**

Once the planning team has been selected and a leadership structure is in place, the next step is for the team to reach consensus on a philosophy from which to develop a model for the school. This step is absolutely essential to the successful implementation of any model (Public Schools of North Carolina 2000). Because alternative education includes a variety of approaches and concepts, several decisions need to be made regarding the establishment of the program. Will the school be child-centered, with a therapeutic approach, or follow a strict disciplinary model? Will the school be a short-term intervention or allow students to stay until graduation? Will learning be self-directed or guided? Will the curriculum be all encompassing or simply address the basic core studies? The development of procedures and policies pertaining to how students get into the school and how they exit, are embedded within the philosophical construct of the school. Indeed, an agreed-upon philosophical foundation helps to guide the development of all policies and procedures for the school. If the planning team members do not have a strong background or understanding of issues pertaining to differing alternative school models, it is helpful to review the current research and make site visits to a variety of programs. This will not only help the team have a greater understanding of successful programs, but will also help to guide their thinking toward what will work in relation to the overall philosophical construct of the school district.

## **3. Program Design and Operation**

How will the school be funded? Where will it be located? How large should it be? Who will be served? What leadership qualities are to be considered in the selection of a principal or program director? Who will it be? Will transportation be provided to students? How will the school be staffed? Will incentives be offered to staff members? These are but a few of the questions that need to be answered in terms of program development (Chalker 1996). It is suggested that the building principal or program director should be hired and in place at this point, with the planning committee remaining as an advisory board. The nuts and bolts questions of program design and operation are usually best decided by the building principal, with significant input from key district office personnel. This is also the time that policies and procedures governing the daily operation of the school should be developed and placed into operation via the district's chain of command.

## **4. Selecting Staff Members**

Staff members should not be randomly assigned to the alternative school. The building principal should carefully recruit and select the staff, with appropriate stakeholder input, based on the mission of the school and the prospective candidate's passion and commitment to work with at-

risk children (Public Schools of North Carolina 2000). Students can overcome bad teaching but they may never recover from a bad teacher who fails to project a true sense of concern and caring.

## **5. Designing the Curriculum**

Issues such as the desired student to teacher ratio, the integration of technology, the development of career skills, the integration of social services, the integration of service-learning, planning time for teachers to include opportunities for collaboration, and specific course offerings should be decided as a group process by the entire faculty. This time should be used to develop a sense of “family” and to ensure that everyone understands their specific role, yet recognizing that every staff member is expected to be an informal counselor and support person to students (Kellmayer 1995).

## **6. Getting the Word Out—Building Community Support**

Soon after the staff is in place, efforts should be made to begin letting the general public know about the school and its mission. Include information about the school and staff members in official correspondence sent out by the school district. Invite representatives from the local media to an open house, introducing staff members and providing tours of the facility (Barr and Parrett 1997). Start very early in your quest to build community support through speaking engagements at local service organizations, churches, and clubs. Write personal letters to public safety officials and local community and business leaders explaining the mission of the school and how it will help the community as well as individual students. In addition, make courtesy calls to the executive officers of local businesses, seeking their support and collaboration to include a career development component within the curriculum. It is also a good idea to include parents in any efforts to spread the word about the school. This may help to dispel notions that the school is for the “bad” kids, but rather it is designed as another intervention for those who may not respond well to the regular school program. It is important to develop a positive image of the school so that the parents of those assigned to the school believe that the school will help their child and is not designed to be punitive.

## **7. Enrolling and Exiting Students**

No matter how students are assigned to the school, either by choice or by involuntary placement, it is imperative that every effort be made to make students feel welcome and to assure them they are getting a fresh start on their education. A structured entrance procedure should be developed that includes a comprehensive testing and orientation process. Specific entry times should be established so that the orientation process will not become trite and mundane. Parents or guardians should be involved in the orientation process as much as possible. Individualized academic and behavioral plans that include measurable goals and objectives should be developed for each student. This is a great way for counselors to begin the process of developing a personal relationship with students. It is also a good idea to start seeking a good match for a one-to-one mentor for the student. While students are being served, the student’s home school should be kept informed of the student’s progress through some type of formal communications link. This

will help to prevent teachers and administrators from the home school from feeling like “he/she is your problem now—call me when he/she is ready to come back.” (Public Schools of North Carolina 2000)

Exit procedures for students that are fair, clear, and simple to understand are a must for programs that return students to their regular school. The process for exiting students must also be structured and organized. Once students have left the program, it is highly advisable to continue monitoring and supporting them as they adjust into the mainstream (Public Schools of North Carolina 2000). We know students are very vulnerable upon their re-entry into their former school. Sometimes this is due to teachers or administrators who continue to harbor negative attitudes toward the student, or it may be for a myriad of other reasons that include reconnecting with peers who negatively influence them, or adjusting to the transition from a rigid monitoring system to a system with more independence. Though it is time consuming and labor intensive, it is also a good idea to continue to track all students who exit the program so that accountability statistics can be recorded regarding program effectiveness.

Once a program has been established, it should be monitored for strengths and weaknesses on a regular basis. This requires some formalized system of data collection. The next section provides an overview of effective alternative school evaluation components.

## **Alternative School Evaluation**

One of the needs often cited by alternative educators in the field is the necessity for an evaluation instrument that adequately and reliably documents the effectiveness of their programs. Due to the varying mission and structure of alternative schools, effectiveness is very difficult to define and measure and is not adequate for evaluation purposes. Effectiveness for one school may indeed be a measure of mediocrity for another. What to measure and how to measure it have been stumbling blocks for program managers responding to those seeking greater accountability for alternative schools.

Furthermore, the research and evaluation of alternative school programs and their effectiveness is somewhat limited. Historically, many schools have not kept accurate records regarding attendance, discipline referrals, academic grades, recidivism rates, school completion rates, etc. Montecel (1999) found that reports of program success are usually based on anecdotes rather than data.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a strong anti-evaluation sentiment in the alternative education community (Kellmayer 1995). Some teachers and administrators believed that rescuing students from life-threatening social situations such as gang involvement, parental abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide was enough. Over time, however, we have come to realize that saving students from social problems is important, but their academic education must also be a priority.

This is evidenced by the fact that most states are now requiring accountability for all programs, including charter and alternative schools. The Florida Department of Education has developed an evaluation model to measure the effectiveness of local alternative schools and dropout prevention programs. The *Proposed Quality Standards for Dropout Prevention Programs*



(Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Education 1999) is a self-assessment tool for practitioners. The *Standards* list six major components: program climate, program resources, curriculum and instruction, transition, program planning and evaluation, and leadership. These six areas are measured against essential practices that must be in place for the program components to be effective. The third facet of the evaluation process includes measurable indicators of achievement.

The state of Kentucky has also addressed alternative school accountability through a preliminary investigation conducted by the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Center for School Safety. These offices undertook the task to devise an instrument consisting of research-based standards and indicators to evaluate alternative schools specifically in Kentucky. Subsequently, an evaluation guidebook, *Alternative Education Accountability: School/Program Performance Evaluation/Booklet for Administrators and Teachers, Grade Levels: 7–12* (Swarts 2002) was developed.

There have been only a handful of well-known researchers and leaders in the field of alternative education who have worked to develop instruments, or rubrics, that guide the evaluation of programs that serve children at-risk of school failure. Dr. Raymond Morley was one of the first researchers to begin looking at formulating a model to evaluate alternative schools. He developed a checklist of indicators that serves as a framework for establishing and maintaining quality alternative learning environments, as well as an Iowa Rubric for At-Risk Programs that describes required components and quality examples of effectiveness (Morley 2002).

Jackson (2002) developed a research-based document outlining the characteristics of effective alternative programs. Gregory (2000) looked at alternative school evaluation via four major issues that are addressed through practices regularly employed by alternative schools or their districts. Scriven, a leading authority on evaluation, has developed the fifteen point Key Evaluation Checklist (KEC) to be used in a comprehensive evaluation of an alternative school (Kellmayer 1995).

Each of these researchers and practitioners has looked at alternative school evaluation through a different lens, yet all essentially merge around ten essential elements, or categories, that the NDPC/N at Clemson University has identified as the foundation for any program looking to produce positive outcomes for students. While there may be some debate as to the importance of these essential elements in relation to one another, the research clearly shows these specific categories must be in place and measured for an alternative school program to be considered “successful” or “effective” no matter how success is measured, and no matter what the mission of the school may be.

With the exception of the evaluation process in Kentucky, the checklists and rubrics previously cited can be described as a Level One analysis. Level One is a basic look at an alternative school with regard to its resources, policies, and practices. It is primarily a self-evaluation process that can be used to take a wide-angle look at the effectiveness of the school. Alternatively, third-party evaluators or stakeholders could use it as a preliminary function of a Level Two analysis. Level Two would be a more in-depth analysis of the school that would include staff and stakeholder

interviews, on-site observations resulting in a significantly more detailed report of the findings. A Level Two analysis is a difficult process requiring specialized skills, so most experts advise hiring a third-party evaluator.

### **Level One Analysis**

The ten major categories or essential elements of effective practice for alternative schools, developed by the NDPC/N have been incorporated into a Level One analysis evaluation instrument. Under each of the ten categories are best practice indicators that are to be rated as: “Rudimentary” (poor performance); “Developing” (below expected standard); “Proficient” (meets expected standard); “Accomplished” (above expected standard); or “NA” (does not apply). The ten categories, along with a brief description, are below.

### **Accountability Measures**

Just as regular schools are being held more accountable for quantitative performance indicators such as test scores, dropout rates, and attendance rates, so are alternative schools. This category reports school success, compared against specific benchmarks, from traditional data sets such as academic achievement on standardized tests, student and teacher attendance rates, suspensions, and expulsions, as well as program completions rates, and student recidivism rates. It should be noted that because many alternative school students have a myriad of social problems, some would advocate that data regarding affective and health-related issues such as substance abuse, depression, suicide attempts, teen pregnancy, etc. should be included as indicators of school effectiveness (Kellmayer 1995). However, these are areas that schools have little or no control over; therefore, they should not be held accountable regarding their intervention success or failure.

### **Administrative Structure and Policies**

Indicators that look closely at the mission statement, objectives, and purpose of the school, along with the development and enforcement of written policies, are aimed at determining the effectiveness of the administrative support structure and how stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process. Written policies pertaining to discipline, attendance, and admission and exit procedures need to be examined for fairness and equity as well as alignment with the program philosophy and goals.

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

The foundation of an effective alternative school is a strong academic program that is creative and flexible and characterized by the following practices and components:

- Teachers are perceived as caring while providing rigor and high expectations regarding academic performance.
- Each student has an individualized education plan (not to be confused with the education plan required for handicapped students) that includes behavioral objectives, as well as academic objectives.

- Academic and career education components are integrated and contextualized to provide students with a range of problem-solving and employability skills.
- The coursework is primarily hands-on, meaningful, and engaging to students.
- Class size is limited to approximately ten students per teacher, and the teacher has an assigned teaching assistant at least 50 percent of the day who works directly with students.
- Computers and appropriate software are readily available in each classroom, and teachers consistently integrate technology into the curriculum.
- The teaching and learning atmosphere is positive, where teachers are perceived as caring, and the classrooms are places where students feel confident and safe enough to learn.
- An organized, structured mentoring program is in place that engages students one-on-one with a mentor at least one hour per week.
- Alternative methods of assessment are used to accommodate the differing learning styles of students and to provide rewards and incentives for academic excellence.
- There are educational options for students that include extracurricular activities, enrichment activities through service-learning, opportunities for accelerated learning, and work experience or career training opportunities.
- Distance learning is employed to provide relevant coursework for students needing courses outside the capacity of the school to provide on site.

## **Faculty and Staff**

In an alternative school setting, recruiting and selecting the right staff cannot be emphasized too strongly. Staff with relevant experience and competencies, as well as a deep commitment to work with students at risk are vital to the success of the program. Teachers should be properly certified for the area(s) they teach, but it should be kept in mind that teachers can often overcome any academic handicaps by exhibiting a deep level of concern and caring for their students. Ongoing professional development is critical, and each teacher should have an individualized professional development plan. Sufficient funds for staff members to regularly attend and make presentations at conferences and workshops should be included in the budget. Access to a comprehensive professional library and payment of professional organization membership by the school encourages professional growth of the staff.

## **Facilities and Grounds**

We are all well aware of the impact an inviting, clean, and well-maintained facility makes on us whether it is our local supermarket, our church, or the school our children attend. Alternative schools are often hampered in their quest to develop and maintain effectiveness by their location, their physical attributes, and their capacity to provide programs that meet the needs of their students. Every effort should be made to centrally locate the school within the school district in a safe environment, to build or secure a building that is attractive and inviting, to equip it with appropriate technology and equipment so that it is adequate for the services to be provided, and

to ensure that it meets local and state fire and hazard codes. Finally, research has provided strong evidence to support the fact that the school size should be limited to no more than 250 students (Morley 2002, Public Schools of North Carolina 2000, Schargel and Smink 2001).

### **School Leadership**

Characteristics of successful school leaders include: good managers of personnel and resources, react well in times of crises, effective and knowledgeable instructional leader, and strong “political leadership” skills. In other words, he or she must be able to articulate a vision for the school and have the capacity to move the agenda forward through a myriad of obstacles that may include interference from within. This may be an area that sets alternative school leaders apart from their counterparts in “regular” schools. An effective alternative school leader has to be able to fight the “second-class citizen” syndrome to ensure the school is viewed as an important component of the district’s mission to serve all children, and more importantly, to secure the resources needed to fulfill the mission of the school.

### **Student Support Services**

It is well documented that alternative school students typically suffer from a myriad of social, emotional, family-related, and economic factors that are closely associated with their poor academic performance and anti-social behavior. These issues very often interfere with or are root causes of poor academic performance and dropping out of school. Effective alternative schools have a broad range of student support services that address citizenship, behavior, and social and health issues. Guidance and counseling are integral components of the curriculum and include effective parenting and childcare components, as well as serving as a clearinghouse for family support services.

### **Learning Community**

Performance indicators under this category are designed to assess the overall learning community support that includes family involvement, community involvement, student government, and communication issues between school and parents, school and community, administration and staff, and school and students. Family and community involvement are fundamental to the success of any school, but even more so for alternative schools. Parental involvement in the school and educational process occurs less often in the homes of at-risk and underachieving students, and it is a variable that directly discriminates achieving from underachieving students (Christenson, Rounds, and Franklin 1992). Assessing strengths and weaknesses in this area will help to inform and guide the goals and objectives of the school. This assessment can foster closer ties with families and indicate the need to develop strategies to garner community support and resources.

### **Program Funding**

Alternative program models often involve; significantly lower student-teacher ratios than traditional high schools, extensive student support services, and a population that includes students who require extensive remedial help. Thus, adequacy of financial resources is of crucial

importance to alternative education programs (Martin and Brand 2006). Unfortunately, funding of alternative education is inconsistent from district to district in South Carolina (Cash 2001). Without an adequate budget to support program goals and objectives, the alternative school program is doomed to wither into obscurity and provide little or no impact on addressing the needs of those most at risk of school failure. We know that alternative schools cost more to operate, but we also know that there is considerable evidence that alternative schools and programs, when funded sufficiently and organized effectively, can significantly improve students' academic achievement and behavior in school (Cash 2001, Vandegrift 1992).

In 1997, the NDPC/N surveyed alternative school leaders from across the nation. These leaders reported that a secure and stable source of funding was the greatest need in initiating and maintaining effective alternative schools. Per pupil funds are the main source of funding for most alternative education programs (Thakur and Henry 2005). The per capita aid that states provide to local school districts (what is often known as "average daily attendance" or "average daily membership") is both the most stable and the longest lasting source of funding for alternative programs (Martin and Brand 2006). Furthermore, the concept of vertical equity, "the unequal treatment of unequals" (Berne and Stiefel 1994), recognizes student differences that may warrant differential funding through an additional weighting formula based on student characteristics and need (Cash 2001).

Indicators of funding effectiveness include the adequacy of the budget to fully administer the instructional program, an effective discipline program, a comprehensive staff development program, the development and maintenance of technology, a comprehensive student support services program, student incentives, comprehensive student assessment in several domains, and a comprehensive annual evaluation, preferably by a third party.

### **School Climate**

The ethos of the school should be assessed for its performance regarding positive relationships between students and teachers; the safety of the environment; the degree of concern and caring on the part of teachers and other staff members; the degree of equity in terms of learning; and the degree to which staff, students, and parents are treated with respect and dignity. The assessment of the school climate is often overlooked when evaluating program effectiveness due to the qualitative nature of the data and the sometimes laborious documentation process. It is important that surveys are consistently administered to stakeholders, with the results carefully analyzed for areas needing improvement. In addition, feedback from student and parent focus groups and informal comments are typically very direct and prove to be helpful in addressing specific areas of concern regarding the climate of the school.

Data gleaned from the use of the Level One analysis evaluation instrument provides a broad view of an alternative school in the performance of both process and outcome effectiveness measures. The NDPC/N instrument was designed to provide alternative school leaders a concise and efficient way to compare the organization and operation of their school to what the research reveals are best practices in program development and management. It serves as a framework

and guide to begin the process of assessing areas of strength and weakness. As with any assessment instrument, the value of the information is in direct proportion to the honesty and integrity of the evaluator.

## **Level Two Analysis and Beyond**

The available resources may influence a Level Two analysis evaluation plan more than any other single factor. Some things to consider are

- **Time:** Whether you plan to do the evaluation from within or hire an outside consultant, significant planning time will be required from designated staff members. Involving volunteers or parents is a way to spread the workload, but it may require time for preparation or training.
- **Money:** A comprehensive evaluation requires the allocation of significant financial resources. A general rule-of-thumb regarding program evaluation costs is from 2–4 percent of the total program budget for an in-house evaluation and 5–8 percent for an outside, third-party evaluator. In the final analysis, “you get what you pay for.”
- **Expertise:** Few programs or school districts have qualified and experienced program evaluators among their staff. In addition to the time issue noted above, the process of gathering and analyzing data is very complex and could be somewhat overwhelming to those with limited experience or are encumbered with myriad other tasks. The involvement of an outside, third-party evaluator often provides more credibility to the evaluation results.

For those school leaders and program directors seeking a Level Two, in-depth analysis of the operation of their alternative school from an outside evaluator, the NDPC/N’s PAR process has been successfully used in a wide variety of applications and locales throughout the nation to determine at-risk program effectiveness. Moving beyond simple data collection, the purpose of the PAR process is to provide research-based strategies and solutions along with professional assistance. The PAR process involves the analysis of local data, site interviews, and observations, and is managed by local action teams consisting of representatives from the local school and community.

The research base for the PAR process consists of five major themes that guide the review of school data, general observations, interviews and group sessions conducted during the on-site visits. These themes reflect the school reform literature and the proven policies and practices found in successful schools throughout the nation.

### **Theme 1: *District and School Philosophy, Values, and a Spirit of School Improvement***

The district and school staff, business and organization partners, and community stakeholders work collaboratively to support a clear philosophy, mission, goals and set of values.

Theme 2: *Leadership, Staff Resources, and Professional Development Opportunities*

The school leaders, in collaboration with staff and other community stakeholders, provide direction for increasing student achievement through continuous school improvement, which includes professional development opportunities for all staff.

Theme 3: *Curriculum, Instructional Strategies, and Assessment*

Curriculum guides, support materials, instructional strategies, and assessment procedures and activities are aligned to support student learning.

Theme 4: *School, Family, and Community Support Structure for Learning*

The district and school have a comprehensive school and community-based support structure related to student learning for all students and families.

Theme 5: *Adequate Facilities, Current Technologies, and Safe and Orderly Environments*

School facilities, including the availability and use of the latest learning technologies, are adequate and located on a campus that is safe and managed as a caring and violence-free environment.

## **Analyzing and Using Evaluation Data**

The purpose of data analysis is to create meaning out of the information that has been gathered. It must be organized and presented in a way that helps people understand it and to use it for program improvement. Numbers can be interpreted in many different ways and most often need to be placed in context or triangulated with other data sources. For instance: an attendance rate for a “regular” school of 90 percent may not be considered to be very effective, but a 90 percent attendance rate for an evening alternative school program may be outstanding. Likewise, qualitative data need analysis and interpretation. Analyzing and bringing meaning to those “process” indicators of alternative school effectiveness helps evaluation consumers place activities, methods, and program highlights into proper context relating to program outcome measures.

The communication and dissemination of evaluation results should be used to maximize your investment in the project. There are many ways to get the news out. These may include

- a written report,
- a formal presentation to a board of trustees or major funding agent,
- a video or slide presentation,
- media releases,
- posting of the evaluation results on the internet,
- mailing of the major findings in synopsis form to local constituents,
- presentations at workshops and conferences, and
- submission of journal articles about the process and your findings.

## **Some Evaluation Pitfalls**

The push for educational accountability has caused alternative schools to also be caught up in the numbers game. It is easy for program managers to measure program success and effectiveness in terms of quantifiable output indicators while ignoring measures of effectiveness that may not be manifested for years. The reporting of a class graduation rate, suspension rate, attendance rate, etc., is but a snapshot of one brief moment in time relating to the operation and effectiveness of the school. There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence suggesting that alternative schools have positive results on children at risk, long after they have exited the program. In order to properly evaluate at-risk programs in the context for which they are designed, it is imperative that school leaders and program managers collect longitudinal data to document the positive impact of their school over time.

Evaluation is an integral part of the day-to-day operation of the school. It is not an event focusing on an annual report that more than likely stays on the shelf collecting dust. The results should be a working document that energizes all staff members to seek better ways of developing and implementing strategies for meeting the needs of their students.

Program evaluation that is skewed toward good or bad program elements limits the credibility and usefulness of the findings. There must be a willingness among school leaders and stakeholders to accept areas that are in need of improvement by honestly and openly gathering, analyzing, and reporting a true picture of the school. To do otherwise would serve to jeopardize the ethical and political ramifications that must be considered with any formal evaluation.

Failing to properly train the evaluation staff can have serious negative effects on the outcome of the data collection process. Proper understanding and use of survey instruments and interview protocols builds reliability into the results. It is imperative that everyone is on the same page and has the same understanding about what they did or didn't see.

In summary, alternative school evaluation must be considered as much an integral part of the program as the curriculum or specific interventions. Failing to spend the time, energy, and money to properly evaluate is to doom your program to mediocrity or failure.

## **Conclusion**

No Child Left Behind has focused a spotlight on high school completion rates. The disaggregation of data shows the achievement gap between groups of students. Large urban school districts have dismal graduation rates: Detroit, 21.7 percent; Baltimore, 38.5 percent; and New York City, 38.9 percent. Although South Carolina does not have a large urban school district, its state graduation rate often appears in rankings as one of the worst in the nation. Greene and Winters (2006) list South Carolina's graduation rate at 54 percent, which is at the very bottom.

Many citizens are not concerned about the high dropout rate because they believe it has no affect on them. Research suggests that dropouts have a huge impact on the economy. The Alliance for Excellent Education (January 2007) states "if the students who dropped out of the class of 2006



had graduated, the nation's economy would have benefited from an additional \$309 billion in income over their lifetimes" (1). Additional economic effects include lower local, state, and national tax revenues; higher costs for social programs; and difficulty in attracting new business investments because of a less-educated population. The Alliance (January 2007) estimates that for South Carolina if the 29,869 dropouts for the class of 2006 had graduated, the total lifetime additional income would be \$7,766,050,500 (4). The impact on health benefits is also considerable. For white females over their lifetime up to age sixty-five, a dropout will receive \$60,800 in Medicare and Medicaid payments or services; a high school graduate will receive \$23,300; and a college graduate \$3,600 (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, and Rouse 2006). It is obvious from these figures that dropouts have a huge impact on the national and state economy.

Alternative schools provide one option for increasing graduation rates. Several factors have been identified that improve graduation rates and educational success: small school size, personalization, high academic expectations, intensive counseling, parental engagement, extended-time school sessions, and competent personnel (Levin, Belfield, Muenning, and Rouse 2007). These features are almost an exact match for the characteristics of the Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools Type 1 evaluation instrument.

Barr and Parrett (1997) state, "How an alternative school is started may well be the most critical aspect of the emerging life and chance for success a new program experiences" (107). This report provides guidelines for planning, implementing, and evaluating alternative programs. The essential elements and indicators of effectiveness mentioned previously represent the "best practices" of school administrators and teachers as evidenced by a synthesis of the literature and direct observation by researchers.

Alternative programs can be an effective strategy to keep students at risk engaged in learning when properly funded, organized, and operated. They provide the opportunity for these students to be successful and graduate from high school. It's easy to throw students out of school, but it's much harder to help them redirect their energy to become successful in school. There will always be a need for alternative education for those students who do not thrive in traditional schools that are too large, have high teacher to student ratios, and are resistant to change. Alternative programs offer individualized instruction, low teacher to student ratios, flexible scheduling, and varied instructional methods to meet the learning needs of their students.

The next section provides a view of South Carolina alternative schools that are exemplars of the essential elements.

## Findings

### Exemplars of Essential Elements of Effective Alternative School Programs in South Carolina

Reimer and Cash developed the evaluation tool—Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools Type 1 (see Appendix A for items). Each of the ten elements has best practice indicators that the researchers on this project rated on a five point scale for each school visited. An explanation of the scale is below.

Rudimentary	(Rud)	(1 Point)	Effort is minimal and performance is well below expected standard
Developing	(Dev)	(2 Points)	Performance is below expected standard but improving
Proficient	(Pro)	(3 Points)	Expected standard is met but is below highest capacity for success
Accomplished	(Acc)	(4 Points)	Exceeds expected standard and could be considered as a model to emulate
N/A	(N/A)	(0 Points)	Does not apply

The evaluators' ratings were based on on-site observations; interviews with school administrators, faculty, staff, and students; and classroom observations. Below is a description of each of the ten essential elements, a brief discussion of the element as it was observed in the ten schools visited, and exemplars of best practices.

### Student Accountability Measures

#### *Description*

No Child Left Behind has created a stronger emphasis on collecting quantitative data for all schools. Alternative schools in South Carolina are typically considered programs under the auspices of a traditional school, and therefore the data collected on their students are embedded within the traditional school's data sets. As a result, alternative schools have traditionally relied too heavily on anecdotal information to measure their effectiveness. However, alternative school effectiveness measures are slowly moving toward a "growth model" that takes into account such things as how long a student was enrolled in the program or what their achievement and attendance levels were before they entered the program, versus what it is when they exit the program.

#### *Discussion*

Compiling student accountability measures is a challenge because of the schools fluid population. Most of the schools receive new students every week, so recordkeeping is a daunting task. Many of the schools have an attendance officer to track student absences, but some of the schools have limited or no access to the School Administrative Student Information (SASI) computer system used by all other public schools in the state.

Seven of the schools supplied the requested data sets, but there were too many inconsistencies to be able to draw valid conclusions in all the categories. Enrollment data was sufficient to make some inferences. It is clear that males outnumber females by two to one in six of the schools which is consistent with the research. The Phoenix Academy is the exception because it has an almost even distribution between males and females.

Enrollment by race varies quite widely depending on the school. Black students outnumber white students in four of the seven schools. Phoenix Academy serves an equal number of black and white students.

Compiling graduation data is a challenge for the schools. The director of the Greenville programs collects the graduation programs from all the high schools in the district, and then checks for the names of his former students. He reports a graduation rate of 99 percent. Eastside Academy estimates their graduation rate at 85 percent, and Blythewood Academy's rate is 40 percent. The graduation rates reported exceed the national norm of 15–25 percent for alternative schools.

## **Administrative Structure and Policies**

### *Description*

A clear mission statement and purpose are the foundation of an effective alternative school. All stakeholders must be able to verbalize the school's mission and goals. Written policies on discipline, attendance, admission, and exit procedures are important. Shared decision making fosters buy-in from all stakeholders.

### *Discussion*

All of the schools studied have a clear mission statement and purpose. In most instances, stakeholders could state it in their own words. Written policies on discipline, attendance, admission, and exit procedures are available. Shared decision making is fairly standard and usually done informally. Input is solicited by the administrator at staff and team meetings and from committees. Many of the staff stated that the administrator has an open door policy and is open to suggestions. Only one school had a vehicle for student input. Written mission statements, policies and procedures are standard at all the schools, but only a few schools had written policies and procedures for students to return to their home schools.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Eastside Academy**

A point system with levels is used to enable students to earn their way to the top level 4. They must maintain level 4 for three weeks, have passing grades, maintain good behavior, and demonstrate responsibility to be considered for transition back to their home school. Students also have a voice in their return. Towards the end of the semester or nine weeks, Eastside contacts the counselor at the home school, and sets up a meeting with the assistant principal, counselor, a team of teachers, the student, and the director of the Academy to facilitate transition.

### **York One Academy**

Students must meet the five goals (behavior, attitude, grades, attendance, and parental support) in order to return to their home school. The director meets with the receiving principal and the home school counselor. She provides documentation of grades and discipline, information about medications, and mental health counseling continues at the home school if the student is receiving services. The receiving principal does have veto power over allowing a student into the traditional school, but this has never happened. The director makes suggestions on class placement, personality of teachers, and structure. She tries to link athletic and artistic students to a coach or an art teacher to act as a mentor. After this initial meeting, parental permission is obtained to take the student to the home school to talk with the counselor, walk the building, and ask questions. Students are usually transitioned at the end of the semester.

## **Curriculum and Instruction**

### *Description*

This element is the heart of any school, and there are many facets which need to be considered.

- **Curricular Standards and Objectives**

### *Discussion*

State standards for core subjects are a boon to alternative schools. This is particularly true for schools serving multiple districts with varied curricula. Teachers often had the state standard and their objectives for the lesson posted in their classrooms. Textbooks do not always follow the student to the alternative school, so teachers often have textbook collections in their rooms. Teachers reported creating relevant assignments is challenging in a classroom that has students working on multiple grade levels.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Eastside Academy**

Students are grouped by ability and some by behavior and/or discipline. All students are two or three grades behind. Students are assessed in reading and math when they arrive, and teachers work with the student on the level the student is on. Teachers do a lot of remediation, so students are reported to do well when they return to their home schools. The parent liaison from the Academy visits the home schools weekly and refers former Academy students who are struggling, to the home school's services to help improve their grades.

#### **York One**

State standards and objectives for the lesson were posted on the board. Varied methods of instruction were used, including using subject specific computer software, individualized instruction, group work, team activities, games, paired work, and projects. Students were engaged and eager to participate.

## • Integrated Curriculum

### *Discussion*

Shoemaker (1989) defines an integrated curriculum as organizing education so that it cuts across subject-matter to focus on broad areas of study. Learning and teaching are viewed holistically and grounded in the real world. An integrated curriculum is a rare occurrence in an alternative school because the classes are often composed of students from multiple grades, working on different courses, and on different levels in the same course.

With some exceptions, the career education and training piece appeared to be a major missing component in the alternative schools visited. Students get a brief introduction into careers in eighth grade, but career training is virtually nonexistent at the high school level. Givhans is the only school that had students attending a career center and had students in a school-to-work program. Faculty, students, and parents stated they would like to have career training available. It is hoped that EEDA will improve career education in the alternative schools.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Blythewood Academy**

The teacher in the elementary program at Blythewood Academy had two fifth-grade students working on a World War II unit in which she incorporated language arts, social studies, and math.

#### **Givhans Alternative Program**

Students are allowed to take courses at the career center. The career center is not attached to a specific school district, but is funded by the county. Students are also involved in the school-to-work program.

#### **York One Academy**

Students participate in a citizenship/service-learning class in which they use writing and math skills, social studies knowledge, and technology to make visual presentations.

## • Technology

### *Discussion*

Technology availability and integration into the curriculum varied widely. Some schools had hand-me-down computers from other schools in the district. SmartBoards are becoming more common; with one school having them in every classroom. Computers and subject software in the classroom are fairly standard. Computers are used to individualize instruction, for remediation, for credit recovery, and to provide coursework for classes not offered at the school.

Integration of technology into the curriculum was well done by some teachers. A number of the schools listed professional development activities related to technology with some districts offering technology certification levels. District technology coordinators often assisted the schools in training and implementation. NovaNet and PLATO labs were common at the high school level.

Even though students were experienced users of technology, they were outspoken in their dislike of PLATO and NovaNet. They do not like to “teach themselves” and prefer more teacher interaction. They criticized the lack of interaction and the out-dated programs. One student mentioned that one of the modules had a copyright date of 1984. They believe that the software does not take full advantage of the advances of technology. Many of the modules require a great deal of reading, which is a problem for students who do not read at grade level. Even good readers said it was really boring to sit at the computer for hours on end. Although, students recognize that the modules enable them to recover credits and/or take courses that are not available at their school, they would still like the programs to be more interesting.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Anderson County Alternative School**

There is a computer for every student. Technology is kept updated through a leasing agreement for computers. Every year one-third of the computers are replaced. The center contracts with Anderson District Five for technical support.

#### **Lexington Alternative Learning Center**

The Center uses NovaNet and PLATO for curriculum delivery and supplemental instruction. Certified teachers are available in the NovaNet lab to assist students. Streaming video is used and DISCUS is available for research. SmartBoards and laptops are available in most of the classrooms. Subject software is available, and all the teachers have taken the district level technology certification courses. One faculty member is a trained high school NovaNet coordinator and serves as the contact for the entire district. Teachers have individual web sites with their syllabi and projects listed. Teachers were observed using technology in a variety of ways in the classroom.

#### **Phoenix Academy**

Providing online courses is the core of the Phoenix Academy High School program. NovaNet is used for credit recovery, transfer credit, and acceleration. Students progress at their own pace and labs are open from 8:15 a.m.–8:00 p.m. Certified teachers direct and assist instruction.

#### **York One Academy**

Curriculum on Wheels (COW) is an interactive science program for upper elementary and lower middle school students. The computer makes a mooing sound when started, so it grabs the students’ attention immediately.

#### **• Mentoring and Tutoring**

### *Discussion*

Mentoring is one of the proven techniques for helping at-risk youth (Tierney and Grossman 1995), but most of the schools did not have an established mentoring program. Several of them had tried, but had not been successful. Some were in the process of trying to build or rebuild a program.

Teachers reported that small group instruction and one-to-one instruction were common in their classrooms. Students said that in most cases, teachers were willing to help them during class, before and after school, and even during their planning periods. Individual tutoring is rare, but teachers and students did not deem it necessary given the assistance that is available.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Eastside Academy**

The Academy is in the process of strengthening their mentoring program. Church pastors have been a consistent source of mentors over the years. The Lancaster County director for at-risk youth requires his staff to mentor students, and provides incentives for their participation. Other sources of mentors are the Chamber of Commerce Leadership Program, the Sheriff's Department, and the Safety Committee. Two retired educators mentor and tutor. Mentors meet with their students for a minimum of 30 minutes per week, which makes the students feel special.

#### **Greenville County Alternative Programs**

Greenville has a different twist on mentoring. Students do not have a mentor while they are at the alternative school. When they are ready to return to their home school, they identify a teacher at the home school whom they would like to have as a mentor. They write a letter to the teacher asking him to be their mentor. Thus, they have at least one person with whom they can discuss problems and help them when they transition to their home school

#### **• Teaching and Learning Atmosphere**

### *Discussion*

Creative, flexible, and caring teachers are necessary for an alternative school to succeed. Many classrooms have students in different grades, and even those classrooms with one grade still have students working on many different levels. Teachers talked about the various methods they use to encourage their students to learn. Work sheets are still common, but teachers make an effort to break up the class period into different activities. Some of the instructional methods observed were journal writing, reading aloud, silent reading, group discussion, role playing, experiments, active learning, peer tutoring, projects, drama, and using technology.

All of the schools stressed academics, but frequent announcements over the public address system were very disruptive at some schools. The dismissal process at some schools was also distracting because of buses arriving at different times. The last period of the day was a lost cause as far as teaching and learning in some environments.

Caring teachers are one of the hallmarks of an effective alternative school. Students reported that not all teachers were caring, but every school had some caring teachers. Students said that there was at least one teacher they could talk with about their problems. Many students stated that they could also talk with the administrator if necessary. A personal connection is vitally important to the success of at-risk youth. Many of the students felt invisible and ignored at their home school. As one administrator said, "Some of these students aren't even flies on the wall. They just disappear into the wallpaper."

One resource that few of the schools have is a media center or library. Many of the teachers reported having students with low reading levels, and their homes are not usually rich with reading materials. A media center could be of great benefit to them. One administrator, with tongue-in-cheek, mentioned the school's "Bosnian Library." The community had collected books to be sent to Bosnia, but they were never shipped. Those books are now at the school, but there are funds in next year's budget to purchase library materials. Eastside Academy has a small student and professional library, and York One Academy is in the process of building a collection of materials for the media center.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Givhans Alternative Program**

Reading is emphasized and READ 180—Scholastic Reading Assessment—is used to improve reading levels. Class size is limited, so one-on-one instruction is common. NovaNet is available and many of the classes have SmartBoards.

Students reported that their teachers tied learning to the real world, so they understood why it is important to learn. Students are treated as individuals and their learning needs are met in creative ways. A student interested in journalism did an independent study and developed a booklet about the school.

#### **Greenville County Alternative Programs**

The classrooms that were observed had a variety of materials, and one middle school classroom had learning stations. This classroom had various types of seating, not just standard school desks. The students' work was posted.

#### **• Level of Student Involvement**

### *Discussion*

A number of the schools emphasize behavior modification. Students learn to make good choices and to take responsibility for the bad choices that they make. They learn how to be self-directed.

Interviews indicate that students believe they have no input on school policies. Only one school has a formal process for students to be involved in the decision-making process.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Blythewood Academy**

Students elect members of the High School and Middle School Student Councils. The Councils meet every Tuesday and make suggestions to improve the school. They are involved in the reward process for Student of the Week and act as tour guides for visitors. They also function as peer mentors when needed.



## • **Assessment of Learning**

### *Discussion*

There is no evidence to indicate that standardized test results are used to make curriculum changes. Test results are usually sent to the home schools, so they are not used by the alternative schools. The student population changes so much annually, that it is doubtful this information is useful.

Many of the schools use alternative methods of assessment, but tests and quizzes are still the most common. Students may do projects, and make oral and visual presentations.

Rewards and incentives for academic excellence are evident in many of the schools. All schools require that students show academic progress as a requirement for being returned to their home school. A list of students on the Honor Roll is often posted in a prominent place. Rewards and incentives for behavior are more common than academic rewards, however.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Greenville County Alternative Programs**

Teachers use the standard quizzes and tests, but also projects, lab assignments, journals, reading logs, computer learning assessment, and oral and visual presentations to assess their students

#### **Eastside Academy**

Teachers use tests and quizzes, but also project, portfolios, journals and computer assessment.

## • **Educational Options**

### *Discussion*

Student accommodations and adaptations were evident. Several schools had special education teachers and/or resource teachers. The percentage of special education students ranges from 8 percent to 25.5 percent for the 2006–07 school year. Spartanburg County Alternative School houses the McCarthy-Tesztler Clinical Day School for mentally ill children. These students are on a certificate track and are in a self-contained classroom in a separate building. Several of the teachers also have training in special education. They also have an itinerate special education teacher who comes to the school. Eastside Academy has an itinerate special education teacher who comes to the school three days each week. The Alternative Learning Center has a special education and a resource teacher. Students have IEPs and the teacher communicates with the parents frequently.

Extracurricular activities are viewed as a privilege that students give up when they attend alternative schools. Schools do not have a budget for enrichment, and, in many cases, the student body is so fluid that it would be difficult to sustain these activities. Darlington County Intervention School had a volunteer who organized a school chorus. When the school relocated, the volunteer was not able to continue working with the group. Students often mentioned the lack of extracurricular activities, specifically athletic teams.

Enrichment classes and activities vary, but the more common ones are art and physical education. Field trips include visits to colleges, penal facilities, plays, concerts, and restaurants.

Computer instruction does provide the opportunity for acceleration, but it is rare. Almost all of the schools offer students the opportunity to participate in community service, but very few programs offer true service-learning.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Darlington County Intervention School:** Enrichment Activities

Students are exposed to a wide variety of enrichment activities. Field trips are taken to Columbia to visit museums, to Charleston to visit the Yorktown, and to various colleges. Students learned African drumming, participated in an assembly led by a poet laureate, and listened to a Hallelujah Singers concert. A school chorus and a chess club were activities in previous years.

#### **Phoenix Academy:** Accelerated learning

The Academy is a school of choice, so students do have the option of accelerating their learning. One parent commented on the parent survey that his son caught up and finished his senior year six months early. One student stated that he was bored with school and was at the Academy so that he could graduate early.

#### **Spartanburg County Alternative School:** Enrichment Activities

Physical education is available to middle and high schools students. The gym is set up with stations so that students can choose an activity. The physical education teacher takes students off campus for the First Tee Program to expose them to golf and teach them life and social skills. There is also an art teacher on staff.

#### **York One Academy:** Service-learning

York One Academy represented South Carolina at the National Conference of State Legislatures' Project Citizen annual showcase event in 2006. The students' project was a proposal for developing a Boys and Girls Club in York. The students developed and made a presentation to the York City Council and the Boys and Girls Club. Their project scored in the Superior level in the Project Citizen Nation Showcase competition. This is the highest ranking that can be achieved and is the highest ranking that South Carolina has ever earned. Students have also made presentations to the South Carolina State Legislature.

## **Faculty and Staff**

### *Description*

Alternative schools are often considered to be the dumping ground for incompetent teachers or a trial-by-fire for new teachers. The literature emphasizes how important it is that at-risk youth have good teachers. They should have relevant experience and competencies and a strong commitment to working with at-risk students. The schools visited are doing an excellent job of hiring and retaining qualified staff. Ongoing professional development is important, especially training focused on working with at-risk youth.

- **Qualifications**

### *Discussion*

Almost all of the teachers are certified in the area(s) they teach, with a number of teachers certified in more than one area, and some of them having National Board Certification. Almost all of the faculty have chosen to be at the alternative school. Experienced teachers are the norm rather than the exception. Administrators stated that they rarely hire first-year teachers, but will make an exception if they believe a new teacher has the ability to work with their students. Although schools do not have a formal orientation process in place for new hires, teachers did feel prepared for their assignments. Informal mentoring of inexperienced teachers did occur. Some school districts have a required program for first-year teachers, and alternative school teachers did participate in this.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Phoenix Academy**

Approximately half of the teachers have masters' degrees and the average number of years of experience is thirteen. Teachers often described themselves as facilitators and tutors. The director reported low teacher turnover because of the flexibility of their schedules.

#### **Spartanburg County Alternative School**

Over half of the teachers have a masters' degree and the average years of experience is sixteen. Teachers reported using hands-on activities, learning games, and lots of visual aids. The principal stated that the main reason for teachers leaving is retirement.

- **Professional Development Activities**

### *Discussion*

All of the teachers reported being involved in professional development activities. Most districts offer a plethora of opportunities and require teachers to have a professional development plan. Schools also sponsored their own professional development activities focused on at-risk youth. Dr. Ruby K. Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (<http://www.lecturemanagement.com/speakers/ruby-payne.htm>) was the most frequently mentioned example. Others were *Love and Logic* (<http://www.loveandlogic.com/>), Steadman Graham's *Teens Can Make it Happen: Nine Steps for Success* and *Move Without the Ball: Put Your Skills and Your Magic to Work for You!* ([http://www.stedmangraham.com\\_store.html](http://www.stedmangraham.com_store.html)), and classroom management. *Positive Words, Powerful Results: Simple Ways to Honor, Affirm and Celebrate Life* by Hal Urban (2004) was mentioned by the Anderson County Alternative School teachers. Anderson and Givhans had also read *Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results* by Lundin, Paul, and Christensen (2000). There is a "Fish for Schools" web site <http://www2.charthouse.com/ffs/home.asp>.

Many of the faculty reported attending conferences, often related to their subject area. Middle school conferences were frequently attended and the NDPC/N conferences were also mentioned. Financial support was often available to attend conferences, but membership dues are paid by individuals.

Professional libraries are rare. Administrators often share their professional books and journals with faculty. It is assumed that faculty would have access to the district's professional libraries.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Darlington County Intervention School**

Wednesday afternoons are devoted to staff development. Dr. Edwards chooses a book at the beginning of the school year that all of the staff read. They have read Steadman Graham's *Teens Can Make it Happen: Nine Steps for Success*, (<http://www.stedmangraham.com/store.html>) and John Miller's *The Question Behind the Question* (<http://www.qbq.com/features/desktop.php>). They have had workshops on *Frameworks of Poverty*. Dr. Hill has also done a workshop on working with achievement for minority students. Faculty also participate in district workshops and attend state, regional, and national conferences.

#### **Eastside Academy**

The Academy has a grant to fund a three-day end of school year retreat. The staff prepares everything for the next school year so that they can concentrate on the students. They reflect on the past school year, and work on building a team spirit.

#### **Spartanburg County Alternative Program**

The school pays for conference registrations, travel, lodging, and meals. Faculty reported attending subject specific conferences in English, science and math, and making presentations. They had several training sessions on Dr. Ruby K. Payne's, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* <http://www.lecturemanagement.com/speakers/ruby-payne.htm>. Districts offered sessions on working with disruptive students, and gangs. They have also visited other alternative schools to study their methods.

### **• Classroom Management and Teaching Methodology**

#### *Discussion*

Classroom management is challenging in all school settings, but particularly so in alternative schools. The majority of the students in an alternative school are there because of multiple discipline referrals. Teachers who can handle their classroom discipline problems also relieve the principal or assistant principal from dealing with minor incidents.

Teachers also need to use a variety of teaching methodologies to facilitate learning, as well as have some knowledge of learning styles. Many students are not traditional learners, so teacher need to be creative in their efforts to reach them.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Blythewood Academy: Classroom Management**

Fred Jones provided training on classroom management, and an online course was also available. Teachers developed and implemented classroom management plans. The principal reported that there was a different atmosphere in many of the classrooms, and referrals to the office have been reduced.

**Darlington County Intervention School: Teaching Methodology**

Teachers reported using a variety of methodologies designed to meet the individual needs of their students: lecture, teacher demonstration, guided practice, hands-on activities, visual aids, modeling, group work, projects, Socratic questioning, and one-on-one instruction.

**Lexington Alternative Learning Center: Classroom Management**

Teachers reported that they have few discipline issues, but usually handle most of them immediately in their classroom. They know their students and can tell when students may be struggling to control their behavior. Teachers have the authority to suspend a student for up to three days which they suggested could also be a deterrent to disruptive behavior

**Facilities and Grounds***Description*

Every student should be able to attend an inviting, safe, clean, and well-maintained school. It should also be inviting and accessible to the disabled.

*Discussion*

Most alternative schools are housed in buildings 50 or more years old, or in portables. Abandoned elementary and middle schools have been repurposed as alternative schools. Even with renovations, they still do not provide for new technology needs. One director said, "I opened the door of the portable, looked down, and saw goats running around. There was no floor." Only one school had a biology laboratory, Blythewood Academy, with the rest of the schools having no lab facilities for science courses.

The majority of the schools were very clean and well-maintained considering their age. Many of the restrooms did need renovations. Sinks were at a height for elementary, rather than middle or high school students. Some commodes were not working, and soap and paper towels or hand dryers were not available.

The schools are rarely centrally located. Students reported bus rides of more than two hours. School schedules are determined by bus routes in some instances. Location can also hinder parent involvement.

Research suggests that school size should be no more than 250 students (Morley 2002, Public Schools of North Carolina 2000, Schargel and Smink 2001). School enrollment swells as the end of the school year approaches. The majority of the schools try to cap their enrollment to maintain a 1:10 teacher-to-student ratio, but some schools have ratios of 1:15 or 1:25 at the end of the year.

*Exemplars***Anderson County Alternative Program**

The students maintain the school grounds, and the school has received grants for beautification. The main building has been extensively renovated and two new wings have been added.

### **Phoenix Academy**

The Academy is in an older school building that has been extensively renovated. It is attractive, sparkling clean, and spacious.

### **Spartanburg County Alternative Program**

The middle school students painted the walls and added designs and murals to the restrooms. They are very proud of their work and inform new students that the restrooms are to be kept clean. They have also adopted the road near their school and pick up the litter. Neighbors have expressed their appreciation for the work the students have done.

## **School Leadership**

### *Description*

A strong and effective school administrator is one of the hallmarks of an effective alternative school.

### *Discussion*

All of the schools have strong leaders. Turnover is surprisingly low for such a challenging position. The majority of the administrators are the founders of their schools and have been there from eight to eleven years. Faculty consistently praised their administrators for their leadership abilities and excellent management of personnel and resources. Alternative school administrators deal with numerous students, teachers, parents, principals, guidance counselors, district superintendents, community agencies, law enforcement, city and county political agencies, community groups, and funding groups. Political leadership skills are important because of all the stakeholders involved. Most of them do not have an assistant principal to groom for their position when they retire. There is cause for concern when these dynamic administrators leave. Will the schools be as effective with a new leader? Two administrators have been recognized by their peers as effective leaders.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Eastside Academy**

Ms. Janet Cato founded, and has been the only director of her school. In 2004 she won the National Dropout Prevention Network Crystal Star Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention and Prevention for an individual. Ms. Cato has been recognized by the Lancaster Chapter of the Optimist Club for outstanding leadership in the community, received the Scroll of Honor for Outstanding Achievement in Lancaster County by the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and named South Carolina Rural Educator of the Year in 2004.

#### **Lexington Alternative Learning Center**

Mr. Jim Harpe founded the school and has been its only director. He was the first chair of the South Carolina Alternative School Association. He has been nominated for Alternative School Director of the year for 2007.

## **Student Support Services**

### *Description*

Alternative schools students often suffer from a range of social, economic, behavior, and family-related problems that impact their academic performance. Schools reported that students needed to be treated holistically in order for them to learn. There are several facets to this element:

#### **• Food Service**

### *Discussion*

The majority, but not all, of the schools provided lunch for their students. Very few had on-site preparation of meals. Students often complained that hot food was cold, and cold food was warm. They would also like to have more variety, with many schools having only one entrée. Inadequate portions were also an issue for many males. Students frequently requested a salad bar option. Teachers reported that lunch was the main meal of the day for many of their students. Children at one school frequently chose milk when offered a reward. The availability of nutritious meals, counseling, health services, and reliable transportation can directly impact the academic performance of students at-risk.

### *Exemplars:*

#### **Givhans Alternative Program**

Meals are prepared onsite and portions were ample. This is the only school that students did not voice numerous complaints about the food.

#### **• Support Services**

### *Discussion*

Alternative school students often have multiple issues that impact their school attendance and achievement level. Anger management and conflict resolution are listed frequently by faculty and students as skills they need to learn.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Anderson County Alternative School**

Anderson has a team composed of a guidance counselor, mental health specialist or counselor, social worker, and a nurse. Each student receives a full mental health assessment. The nurse manages their Healthy Schools Program, and they are the first alternative school in the state to be designated in all eight health components. To be named a Healthy School, schools must demonstrate a coordinated team approach to improving student health and provide evidence of achieving best practices in at least one component of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Adolescent and School Health Eight-Component model of Coordinated School Health. The components are: family and community involvement; skills-based health education; health services; healthy and safe environment; physical education and activity; nutrition; guidance, psychological and social services; and staff wellness.

### **Greenville County Alternative Programs**

Greenville collaborates with a variety of community agencies that provide services on site: mental health, YMCA, state Department of Social Services, Greenville Family Partnership provides drug counseling, Phoenix Center in Greenville also provides drug counseling, the Communities in School (CIS), and the Get Smart programs.

### **Spartanburg County Alternative Program**

Spartanburg has very strong in-house support services. They have a counselor, nurse, mental health counselor, two intervention specialists, a school resource officer, and an attendance and truancy intervention office. The intervention specialists monitor students' needs, and work with guidance and the administration to develop programs which provide aid and assistance to students. Conflict resolution and anger management groups are offered and character education is integrated into the curriculum.

### **• Citizenship, Conduct, and Social and Health Issues**

#### *Discussion*

Schools vary widely in this area of support. Personal and behavioral management instruction is more common at the middle school level. Several schools use a point or level system to encourage students to behave responsibly. Others rely more on punishing bad behavior.

Drug and alcohol prevention and treatment are usually provided by community agencies. Conflict and anger management instruction were stressed more in schools with a behavior modification emphasis. Many of the faculty described their students as angry, so this type of instruction is important.

Parental involvement is a continuing challenge. Many parents work more than one job, and some do not have reliable transportation. Only a few schools provide parenting skills instruction. Some schools survey parents at the beginning of the year to determine areas of interest. Instruction is usually offered in a workshop format with food provided.

#### *Exemplars*

##### **Eastside Academy**

Eastside uses a point and level system. Each student starts with twenty-five points, and they can earn additional points for class participation and avoiding conflict. They also receive twenty-five bonus points if a parent attends the monthly training sessions. Daily point sheets are sent home with the students. Participation in monthly parent training sessions is required, but not all parents attend. A celebration for those who attend regularly is held at the end of the school year.

##### **York One Academy**

York One also uses a point and level system. Students who advance a level are recognized at an assembly after lunch. Students who are at the highest level earn the privilege of wearing regular clothing. Monthly workshops for parents are held.



## • Student Counseling

### *Discussion*

The majority of the schools have a full-time counselor on site. Some counselors served multiple sites, and in some instances the administrator acted as a counselor. Most of the students reported that the counselor was very accessible. Career counseling was very weak in many of the schools. The Education and Economic Development Act should provide the impetus for a greater emphasis on careers. Counselors reported having the flexibility to meet their students' needs. There are few formal procedures for monitoring and supporting students when they return to their home schools. Alternative school counselors talk and email their counterparts at the home schools, and some counselors from the home schools do visit their students at the alternative school. Students often return to their home schools under a behavior contract, so they often interact more with the principal or assistant principal. Alternative school counselors encourage their counterparts in the students' home schools to contact them if there is a problem. Alternative school counselors also reported receiving emails and telephone calls from students needing support.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Eastside Academy:** Student Support at Home School

A parent liaison meets with the Academy students who have returned to their home schools on a weekly basis. The home schools call her if a student is having problems. She also makes visits to the students' homes as necessary.

#### **Givhans Alternative Program:** Career Counseling

Givhans is the only school that has students attending a career center. The career center is independent of the school district and is supported by county funding. They also have several students who participate in the school-to-work program. Their school day ends at 1 p.m., so it is easier for students to work part-time.

#### **York One Academy:** Student Support at Home School

Teachers visit their students at their home schools on a quarterly basis to check on their progress. They have identified people at the home schools who will contact them if there are problems. The teachers reported that this is becoming more difficult as the school grows, and the students progress through the grades.

## • Transportation of Students

### *Discussion*

In most cases, the school district(s) provided bus transportation at no cost to the students. Some schools required the students to provide their own transportation, and one school has its own buses. Bus transportation was often disruptive to the learning process during the last period of the day. Students come from many different feeder schools and ride a multitude of buses. Announcements were made over the public address system about bus departures often starting at 2:15 p.m. and ending at 3:00 p.m.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Anderson County Alternative School**

This is the only school that has its own buses. There is one dismissal time, so the interruptions of multiple bus departures are eliminated. School staff members drive the buses.

#### **Eastside Academy**

Eastside Academy addresses the challenge of multiple bus times by establishing an exploratory period at the end of the day. On the day the research team made their visit, the students were observed working on a puppet play on anger management to present to other students.

### **Learning Community (Staff, Students, Parents, and Community)**

#### *Description*

The involvement of all stakeholders in the learning community contributes to the success of the school. Family involvement of at-risk youth is often less, and it is a factor that separates achievers from underachievers (Christenson, Rounds, and Franklin 1992).

#### **• Family Involvement**

#### *Discussion*

Teachers reported that parents are usually quick to respond to requests for conferences. Most schools schedule parent-teacher conferences as needed, rather than on a regular schedule. Informal contact is often established with parents when they drop off or pick up their children. Teachers often spoke with them as they waited in line for their children. Nine-week progress reports are standard.

None of the schools has an active parent involvement organization. Transportation, distance, and work schedules are some of the barriers to establishing such an organization. Few schools schedule regular family activities.

Counselors reported referring families to community agencies for help. Home visits are made as needed, but safety is an issue since some students do live in high-crime neighborhoods.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Eastside Academy**

Parents are required to attend monthly parenting skills workshops. The Academy has a parent liaison position funded by a three year grant. This person does home visits and assists students and parents when they return to their home school.

#### **York One Academy**

Monthly parent nights are held. At the beginning of the year parents are surveyed about their needs, and workshops are based on these requests. A satisfaction survey is done at the end of the year.

- **Community Involvement**

*Discussion*

Many of the schools report having to overcome a negative image in the community. Alternative schools are often located in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. Even though many of the students may come from this same neighborhood, the community does not initially welcome them. The schools have worked hard to overcome the stereotype of “a school for bad kids” and are now welcome members of the community. Many of the students have worked on community service projects to improve the neighborhood. Anderson County Alternative School and the Lexington Alternative Learning Center have advisory boards that include community members. Community groups provide mentors and incentives for students. Community foundations are also a source of funding for some schools.

*Exemplars*

**Anderson County Alternative School**

The Governing Board of Trustees consists of an assistant superintendent from each district, the former Tenth Judicial Circuit Solicitor, and a representative from the County Board of Education. They have worked with the city to raze an abandoned building that was a crack house. Students are now building a walking/running track for the community. School events and accomplishments often appear in the local newspaper. A Saturday program is provided by the Manhood Academy through Partners for a Healthy Community.

**Darlington County Intervention School**

The community did not want the school in their neighborhood, so the director was determined to prove that the school was an asset. Students distribute flyers inviting community members to school events. A recent workshop on gangs attracted over 500 people from the neighborhood. Concerts by national groups such as the Hallelujah Singers have also been well attended.

**Lexington Alternative Learning Center**

The center has a school renewal committee composed of business people, teachers, and influential community members.

- **Students**

*Discussion*

A student orientation process that requires the attendance of a family is standard in all of the schools. Some schools schedule group orientations, while other schools do one-to-one orientations. Darlington and the Lexington Alternative Learning Center require middle school students to attend a transition program before they are placed in the regular classroom. This allows the students to make a smoother transition into the regular classroom.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Darlington County Intervention School**

All new students attend a two day transition class and complete a variety of assignments. They write a one-page essay on why they were assigned to the school, complete math and language diagnostic tests, write a biopoem describing themselves, and develop a travel plan. The travel plan describes their goals and identifies four people (dream team) who will help them achieve their goals. They present their travel plan to the other students.

#### **Lexington Alternative Learning Center**

Middle school students are required to attend TAP (transition assessment program) for three weeks when they arrive at the Center. Teachers assign work and the students also use PLATO. At end of three weeks students are assessed emotionally and academically and the lead teacher and the counselor decide on placement. TAP gives students time to acclimate to the school atmosphere and lessens disruption when they are assigned to the regular classroom

#### **• Communication**

### *Discussion*

The majority of the schools do an excellent job of communication between the administration and the staff and the school and students. Communication between the alternative schools and home schools could use improvement. Communication from the home schools to the alternative schools is often the weakest link in the communication chain. Some schools send home daily reports to be signed by parents. Teachers call parents with good and bad reports and also use email. Some teachers also write notes to parents and send them home with the students. Some schools prefer to maintain a low profile in the community and rarely publicize their activities.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Eastside Academy**

Teachers complete daily progress sheets which the students take home for a parent signature. Teachers and the administrator often discuss options for meeting students' needs in the evening.

#### **Givhans Alternative Program**

Teachers complete one or two "Your child was caught doing good postcards" every week and send them home. One child reported, "My momma put it on the refrigerator." Teachers frequently call parents about good and bad behavior. Email is used on a daily basis, and a system called InTouch allows parents to check on grades, discipline referral, and attendance. Some of the middle school students have daily behavior cards that parents must sign. Conferences are scheduled for parents to talk with several teachers at one time. Parents also receive interim and nine weeks reports. There are also periodic parent newsletters.

#### **York One Academy**

Students take home daily progress reports for their parents to sign. Daily student assemblies are held. There are monthly parent workshops.

## **Program Funding**

### *Discussion*

Complaints about funding were surprisingly few. Although administrators, faculty, and staff said they could always use more money, budgets were adequate. Funding for technology was mentioned most frequently as being inadequate. Several schools use grant money to supplement their budgets.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Anderson County Alternative Program**

Anderson is the only program that does not rely on district allocations. The school is funded by a two mill county tax. Teachers are also required to write two grant proposals per year, which accounts for \$12,000–\$14,000 annually. Grants have funded an art program, school beautification, and a school resource officer.

## **School Climate**

### *Discussion*

At-risk youth are particularly sensitive to school climate. A culture of caring and concern is vital to their success. The reason most often given for dropping out of school is no one cares about me. Students at the alternative schools report that teachers know their names and are concerned about them.

A safe learning environment is a priority for alternative schools. Some schools had metal detectors and searched students for weapons and contraband every morning before they entered their classrooms. Schools also had established codes of conduct, discipline procedures, and many required students to wear uniforms.

### *Exemplars*

#### **Givhans Alternative Program**

Many of the schools had an inviting atmosphere, but a family environment was frequently mentioned during interviews with faculty, staff, and students. Students are not scanned by a metal detector, nor are they searched when they enter the school. There are plants and flowers at the entryway, and students are greeted with a smile at the door. Uniforms are not required, but there is a dress code. The school is bright and cheerful, and a display case features students on the honor roll. When the secretary's son died, the students built a memorial garden for him.

## **Summary**

Creating a Type 1 alternative school that has all of the essential elements is a daunting task. There are schools that are exemplars of best practices, but there is no school that is doing an excellent job in all areas. A common comment from the schools is that they are evolving and developing and searching for ways to improve their services to their students. The following chart provides an overview of the exemplars for each element.

**TABLE 1****Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools Matrix**

Schools	Adminis- trative Structure and Policies	*Curriculum and Instruction	Faculty and Staff	Facilities and Grounds	School Leader- ship	Student Support Services	Learning Community	Program Funding	School Climate
Anderson		x		x		x	x	x	
Blythewood		x	x						
Darlington		x	x				x		
Eastside	x	x	x		x	x	x		
Givhans		x				x	x		x
Greenville		x				x			
Lexington		x	x		x		x		
Phoenix		x	x	x					
Spartanburg		x	x	x		x			
York One	x	x				x	x		

The black X's indicate the exemplars listed in the previous section

\*Schools had some, but not all facets, of this element.

Note: This chart is not designed to be a "report card" on the programs visited but simply an indicator of where exemplary components were identified

## **School Analysis**

The following analysis provides a snapshot of each alternative school that participated in the project. A brief description of each school is provided: district(s) served, student population, school capacity, and facility. The strengths and challenges were derived from interviews with administrators, staff, and students; surveys of staff, students, and parents; and observations by the researchers.

### **Alternative Academy for Success (School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties)**

Due to logistical difficulties and time restraints it was not possible to complete a site visit.

### **Anderson County Alternative Program (Anderson School Districts One through Five)**

The school is a former armory located in a low-income neighborhood. The armory has been extensively renovated and two new wings added. Anderson serves expelled or court-ordered middle and high school students. They use a boot camp model. Student capacity is 135.

#### **Strengths**

- Administrator
- Funded by two mill county levy
- Experienced teachers
- Social worker and school resource officer make home visits
- Field trips
- Use “Love and Logic” model
- Awards Day
- Support services—guidance counselor, mental health counselor, social worker, and nurse
- Student of the month program
- Program for students whose parents are incarcerated
- Funded grants
- Teaching assistants—one per two teachers
- The facility

#### **Challenges**

- Research suggests boot camp programs are not effective (Brenda, Tombs, and Peacock 2002; Cullen, Blevins, Trager, and Gendreau 2005)
- Multiple curricula—serves five districts
- Transition to regular school
- Parental involvement
- Career and vocational training
- No electives
- Teacher to student ratio higher than 1:10
- No science laboratory

## **Blythewood Academy (Richland School District Two)**

Blythewood Academy has programs for elementary (fourth and fifth grades), middle, and high school students. Students attend in lieu of expulsion. Capacity is approximately 110 students. School motto: "An alternative environment NOT an alternative education."

### **Strengths**

- Administrator
- Assistant principal
- Biology laboratory
- Programs for elementary, middle, and high school students
- Strong district support
- Building to be remodeled this summer
- Middle and high school student councils
- Celebration for students returning to their home schools
- Staff development on Wednesday mornings
- School advisory council meets every month
- Teacher appreciation breakfast
- Media Center
- Student intervention teams
- Funded grants
- "Learn and Serve" service-learning program with voluntary student participation.

### **Challenges**

- Parents must provide transportation
- Not networked with district databases
- Transition to home school
- Communication with home schools
- Integrating technology into the curriculum
- Career and vocational education
- Student teacher ratio at end of year 1:25 in some classrooms
- High teacher turnover

## **Darling County Intervention School—formerly Sonovista (Darlington County School District)**

The school serves middle and high school students who are assigned in lieu of suspension or expulsion. Student capacity is 150, and the facility is located in a neighborhood of federal subsidized housing.

### **Strengths**

- Administrator
- JROTC program
- South Carolina state Teacher of the Year finalist
- Art class



- Transition program for new students
- Point system for return to home school
- Enrichment activities
- Community events
- Sonoco provides incentives for students and teachers
- Afterschool program

### **Challenges**

- No assistant principal
- Outdated technology
- Relocation of school from Hartsville to Darlington
- Transition to home school
- Teacher turnover
- No budget for guidance
- Career and vocational education
- Ninety-five percent of students eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program
- No science laboratory

### **Eastside Academy (Lancaster County School District)**

Eastside Academy serves grades five through nine and has a capacity of thirty-nine students. Students are assigned in lieu of suspension. The facility is located in a lower-income neighborhood.

### **Strengths**

- Administrator
- End-of-year retreat for staff
- Support services: Department of Social Services, mental health, HopeServices, Christian Services, Safe Passage, Project Father
- Family involvement
- Behavior modification plan based on points and levels
- Intensive one-on-one orientation
- “RAVES” luncheon at the end of each nine weeks. Home school representatives eat lunch with their students.
- Grants from community foundations and/or organizations
- Mentoring program
- Student teacher ratio 1:10
- Exploratory class last period of the day
- Character education
- Staff make home visits during the summer
- Parent liaison visits home schools weekly
- Student-led monthly parent-teacher conferences

### **Challenges**

- Teachers have no planning period or lunch break
- Principal who started the school has resigned
- Low student reading levels
- Students can not return to the Academy once they transition to their home schools
- No guidance counselor, but administrator is a guidance counselor
- District support
- Seventy-five percent of students eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program
- Students overage for grade

### **Givhans Alternative Program (Dorchester School District Two)**

The Givhans Alternative Program serves middle and high school students who have been recommended for expulsion or are two or more grade levels behind. It is located in a rural area. The enrollment is 225 with a capacity of 300 students. The main building is fifty years old and there are twelve portables.

### **Strengths**

- Family environment
- Administrator
- School resource officer takes students on fishing trips
- Dorchester County Sheriff's substation on the grounds
- Food prepared on site
- Experienced teachers—several have been teacher of the year
- Parent communication—monthly *Helping Students Learn* newsletter
- Staff development
- Technology integration—all classrooms have SmartBoards
- District support
- “2 in1” program for eighth graders moving to ninth grade
- School-to-work program and agreement with career center
- “Your child was caught being good” post cards
- Support services to include: individual counseling, referrals to family doctors, anger management classes for students and families, drug and alcohol classes with Dorchester County Drug and Alcohol Center, close working relationship with Dorchester Mental Health, Dorchester County Children's Center, Lowcountry Children's Center, Department of Social Services
- Dress code, not uniforms
- Guidelines for success posted in all classrooms

### **Challenges**

- Schedule is 6:50 a.m.–1:00 p.m.
- Busing schedule
- Facility is old and they have twelve portables.
- High student teacher ratio

- Need assistant principal
- Stronger career education program
- Strengthen transition piece
- No science laboratory

## **Greenville Alternative School Programs (Greenville County School District)**

Greenville has a high school and three middle school alternative programs. The high school shares facilities with the Life Long Learning Center, and the middle schools are located in three different career centers. The capacity is approximately forty high school students and 110 middle school students. Most of the students are assigned in lieu of expulsion.

### **Strengths**

- Administrator
- Each student has an individual student plan (ISP)
- Alternative assessments are used
- Low recidivism rate
- Students learning styles and behavior are assessed when entering the program
- Students identify a teacher to mentor them when they return to their home school
- Teachers available afterschool for tutoring
- Field trips for enrichment—two or more per semester
- Life skills classes
- Experienced teachers
- Team meets every three weeks to review each student's academic, attendance behavior, and social interaction records/progress
- Middle school point system—students must earn their way out by reaching the green level

### **Challenges**

- Four different locations
- Administrator covers all locations
- Counselors divide their time among the schools
- Two program coordinators divide their time among the schools
- High school students must provide own transportation
- Lunch is not provided at the high school, but school is dismissed at 1:30 p.m. Students get snacks from vending machines
- Scheduling—some students have two periods of the same subject. Home schools differ on number of periods, so students sometimes lose credits
- No electives
- Capacity of the program in relation to the size of the district

## **Lexington Alternative Learning Center (Lexington County School District One)**

The Alternative Learning Center (ALC) serves middle and high school students who have been recommended for expulsion. The ALC has a capacity of 150 students of which thirty-six are middle school students. The ALC consists of twelve portables located behind Lexington High School.

### **Strengths**

- Director nominated for Alternative School Director of the Year Award
- High school and middle school Students of the Week are recognized
- School Improvement Council and School Renewal Committee with members from the community
- Teachers do collaborative planning monthly
- Three-week middle school Transition Assessment Program (TAP) for students entering the center
- Strong technology integration
- Experienced teachers
- Teachers available for tutoring before and after school
- Have physical education teacher
- Every staff member has the authority to suspend students
- Individualized instruction
- Individualized behavior plans
- Middle school students start the day with a thirty minute walk with the administrator

### **Challenges**

- Communication with home school assistant principals
- Transition to home schools
- Facility is all portables.
- Limited course offerings
- No assistant principal
- No science laboratory
- No cafeteria

## **Phoenix Academy (Rock Hill School District Three of York County)**

Phoenix Academy has two program components: 1. the high school students choose to attend, and they may not have any discipline issues; and 2. the CrossRoads program is a more traditional alternative school program for eighth and ninth graders with a maximum of forty students. These students are referred by their home counselors, usually because of behavior issues. When they complete the program they move to tenth grade. The school serves approximately sixty fulltime and 160 part-time students and is located in a business district.

### **Strengths**

- Administrator
- Self-paced learning
- Flexible schedule for high school students—evening program
- Accelerated learning
- Technology integration
- Mastery level rather than seat time credit
- Graduation celebration for seniors
- Learner-centered rather than teacher-centered
- Teachers make five parent contacts per week and two home visits per semester
- Required community service

### **Challenges**

- Students provide own transportation
- Student teacher ratio 1:15 or 1:20
- Waiting list of 250 students
- No electives
- Family involvement
- Career and vocational education
- Student attendance and academic progress
- Lack of student-to-student relationships in high school program
- No science laboratory

## **Spartanburg County Alternative Program (Spartanburg County School Districts One through Six)**

The program serves middle and high school students assigned in lieu of suspension or expulsion. Student capacity is 250. It is located near a neighborhood and light manufacturing industry. They serve six school districts.

### **Strengths**

- Administrator
- Principal for the middle school
- Intervention specialists
- Support services
- Art and physical education
- Experienced teachers—some have National Board Certification
- Field trips
- Character education program

### **Challenges**

- Multiple buses
- Multiple curricula—serve six districts
- Inconsistent transition policies by home schools often based on subjective rather than data driven decisions—some schools will not let students return

- Different home school schedules—some have block schedule while others have seven periods.
- Need job coaches and vocational education
- Lack of textbooks and teachers' editions
- High student teacher ratio
- Parental involvement
- No science laboratory

### **York One Academy (York School District One)**

The Academy serves fifth through ninth grade students who are referred by their home school principal. Student capacity is fifty, and it is located in a low-income neighborhood.

#### **Strengths**

- Administrator
- Administrative assistant
- Small size
- Varied instructional methods
- Experienced teachers
- Award winning service-learning program
- Point and level system—improvement acknowledged at school assembly
- Monthly parent workshops
- Daily progress reports sent home
- Saturday School
- Strong district support
- Teachers make quarterly visits to home schools to check on former academy students
- Staff development
- Field trips
- Student incentives

#### **Challenges**

- Reorganizing to middle school (grades five through eight) and high school (grades nine through twelve) next year
- No guidance counselor
- Waiting list for sixth and seventh grades

The research team did not make an in-depth study of the schools. There may be additional strengths and challenges that the team did not identify. The administrators said that their schools are still evolving, and they are constantly searching for ways to better serve their students. Many of the schools have already faced their challenges and are trying to find creative solutions.

## Analysis of Survey Responses

### Parent Surveys

Parent Surveys were requested from each of the sites visited; survey responses were received from five of the schools: Darlington County Intervention School, Eastside Academy, Greenville Alternative School Programs, Phoenix Academy, and Spartanburg County Alternative School. Considering the short time frame in which the surveys could be sent home and returned as well as traditionally low numbers of returns from parents, an excellent number of responses were received.

Parents were asked to respond to twenty-eight statements using Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD). Analyses of statement categories were made by combining SA and A Responses as “Positive Responses” and D combined with SD as “Negative Responses.”

#### Policies and Procedures

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
School admission procedures and rules were fully explained to me before my child was admitted.	94%	6%
I believe the discipline code is fair and is enforced the same for all students.	91%	9%
Behavior problems are handled fairly and effectively.	86%	14%
The school has provided for parental input into policies and decisions.	89%	11%
I understand the mission of the school.	96%	4%
I believe the school is doing a good job following its mission.	95%	5%

- The highest percentage of positive responses was related to Policies and Procedures with 92 percent of parents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statements related to policies and procedures.
- Ninety-four percent of parents felt procedures and rules were fully explained prior to admission.
- Eighty-nine percent or more of parents agreed discipline codes and behavior issues were understood, enforced, and handled fairly, and that they were allowed input into school policies and decisions.
- When asked if they understood the mission of the school, 96 percent of parents agreed. Ninety-five percent believed the school was doing a good job following its mission.

### Student Needs

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
The school is meeting the needs of my child that were not being met at his/her regular school.	84%	16%
I believe my child has turned his/her life around since attending the alternative school.	79%	21%
The school has high standards and expectations for students.	91%	9%
I believe my child has received excellent counseling services.	88%	12%
My child is more likely to graduate from high school as a result of his/her attendance.	80%	20%

- Ninety-one percent of parents believe the schools have high standards and expectations for their children.
- Eighty-four percent believe their child's needs were better met in the alternative school than at their home school.
- Seventy-nine percent of parents agree that their child has made significant life changes since being in the alternative school setting.
- Counseling services received 88 percent positive responses.
- Only 80 percent of the parents feel their child is more likely to graduate from high school as a result of attending the alternative school.

#### Parents wrote the following comments on their surveys.

- "I would like to let the staff of Phoenix Academy know that if not for a school like this my son would have had to drop out and get a GED later in life. Phoenix Academy has made a great positive change in all our lives."
- "I am so happy. I wish every school were like Eastside."

### Faculty/Staff/Administration

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
The faculty and staff are very supportive and caring.	95%	5%
I believe the school has effective leadership.	93%	7%
School staff members have made visits to my home.	18%	82%

- Ninety-five percent of parents expressed confidence in the caring and supportive faculty and staff, and 93 percent believe the school has effective leadership.
- When asked if school staff members have made visits to their homes, 82 percent of parents disagreed or strongly disagreed. Eighteen percent said they have been visited at home.

#### Parents wrote the following comments on their surveys.

- "I think it's great that the teachers can work more with the kids and [there are] less students in class. ...My son's grades are tremendously better!!" (Spartanburg County Alternative School)



### Facilities and School Environment

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
The building and grounds at my child's school are attractive and are adequate to meet the needs of students and faculty.	85%	15%
I feel welcome at my child's school.	96%	4%
My child's school is a very positive place.	86%	14%
I believe my child is safe at school.	86%	14%

- Eighty-six percent of parents agreed their child was in a safe and positive place.
- The facilities were rated by 85 percent of parents as attractive and adequate to meet the needs of students and faculty.
- Ninety-six percent of parents feel welcome at their child's school.

#### Parents wrote the following comments on their surveys.

- "I feel all schools should search each student every morning!!! This would cut down drastically on school shootings." (Darlington County Intervention School)
- "Very clean, friendly, and inspiring atmosphere. I have noticed the children that attend Phoenix have a very positive, assertive attitude towards their future and life in general; in addition their self-confidence is increased."

### Curriculum and Academics

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
Opportunities have been made available for my child to investigate jobs and careers based on his/her interest and aptitude for a particular career or skills.	85%	15%
Testing and evaluation of my child's academic performance has been fair and accurate.	91%	9%
My child has been able to take the courses he/she needs for promotion or graduation.	93%	7%
I am satisfied with the education my child has received at the alternative school.	88%	12%
My child has been able to catch up or move ahead with learning and coursework while there.	89%	11%
Computers and other technology are readily available to students and are used to assist learning in a variety of ways.	97%	3%

- Overall, 91 percent of parents gave curriculum and academics at the alternative school a positive rating.
- The item asking about student's opportunities to investigate jobs and careers was the lowest rated in this category with 85 percent responding positively.
- Ninety-seven percent said computers and technology are readily available.
- Testing and evaluation are deemed fair and accurate by 91 percent of parents.

- Ninety-three percent feel the courses needed for promotion or graduation have been provided, and 88 percent are satisfied with the education received at the alternative school.

**Parents wrote the following comments on their surveys.**

- “I would like my son to attend Greenville Alternative School next year.”
- “This is my second child to attend Phoenix. My first child graduated and owes it all to the support and caring of the staff. Not only do the teachers and administration make the kids feel good about themselves, they give them goals and a future to look forward to. This program is wonderful. All schools should take this approach of positive learning.”
- “I feel like it would be very helpful for the school to teach & offer the children a trade.” (Spartanburg County Alternative School)

**Communications/Parental Involvement**

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
Communication between the school and my home has been excellent.	91%	9%
My child brings home a report card that contains clear information about his/her progress.	89%	11%
I have made ___ visits to the school for conferences, observing teachers, observing my child, etc.	N/A	N/A

- Communication between the school and home was seen as positive by 91 percent of parents.
- Eighty-nine percent of parents believe the report card provides clear information about their child’s progress.
- When asked how many visits the parents made to the school, 163 parents said they have made from one to four visits. Only twenty-nine parents indicated that they had made five to ten visits.

**Parents wrote the following comments on their surveys.**

- “Phoenix Academy has been a godsend for my daughter. The staff is more helpful and communicates effectively. I hope this Academy continues for years to come for other students.

**Other Areas**

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
Having to provide transportation to and from school has not been a problem for our family.	79%	21%
My child was provided access to outside agencies such as Mental Health, Social Services (leave blank if no outside services were needed or requested)	80%	20%

- Issues with transportation were reported by 21 percent of parents.
- When asked if children were provided services from outside agencies, parents were given the option to leave this response blank, which many did. Of the 119 parents who did respond, 78 were in agreement with the statement, 21 were undecided, and 20 disagreed.

**Parents wrote the following comments on their surveys.**

- “More school buses are needed for students pick up in the morning and after school pick up.” (Darlington County Intervention School)
- “I do not feel my child is safe on the bus.” (Spartanburg County Alternative School)

## Student Surveys

Student Surveys were requested from each of the sites visited; survey responses were received from six of the schools: Darlington County Intervention School, Eastside Academy, Givhans Alternative Program, Greenville Alternative School Programs, Phoenix Academy, and Spartanburg County Alternative School. Students were asked to respond to twenty-eight statements using Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD). Analysis of statement categories was made by combining SA and A Responses to yield “Positive Responses” and D combined with SD to yield “Negative Responses.”

### Policies and Procedures

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
School admission procedures and rules were fully explained to my parents and me before I was admitted.	93%	7%
I believe the discipline code is fair and is enforced the same for all students.	66%	34%
Behavior problems are handled fairly and effectively.	72%	28%

- Ninety-three percent of students felt procedures and rules were fully explained prior to admission. This was consistent with the parents’ responses to the same question.
- While 72 percent of the students said behavior issues were handled fairly and effectively, only 66 percent agreed discipline codes are fair and equitably enforced. This was somewhat of a contrast to the parents’ opinions that these two areas were viewed overall as positive in 89 percent of their responses.

### Student Needs

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
My self-esteem has improved as a result of attending this school.	72%	28%
The school has high standards and expectations for students.	83%	17%
I have received excellent counseling services.	64%	36%
Attitudes of my family toward me have become more positive as a result of my experiences at this school.	61%	39%
I have been encouraged to attend additional education/training beyond high school.	78%	22%
I am more likely to graduate from high school as a result of my attendance.	79%	21%
I have been assigned an adult mentor.	30%	70%
I have been encouraged to think independently and to seek more freedom and responsibility at this school.	77%	23%

- Students expressed confidence in improved self-esteem but less than two thirds of the students felt family attitudes have become more positive toward them since attending the alternative schools.
- Two areas of note are mentoring and counseling services. Only 30 percent of students had been assigned an adult mentor, and one third of the students felt they have not received good counseling services.
- The students agreed in 83 percent of the responses that the school maintains high standards and expectations for the students.
- Seventy-seven percent of the students feel encouraged to be more independent in their thinking and taking on more responsibility for themselves.
- Graduation and higher education or training were viewed as attainable goals by 78 to 79 percent of the students. Eighty percent of parents agreed.

#### Students wrote the following comments on their surveys.

- "I think that this alternative school helps with my attitude and my behavior." (Greenville Alternative School Programs)
- "The school really changed me a lot. It saved my education. It changed my attitude towards life and it gave me a whole new outlook on everything." (Phoenix Academy)

### Faculty/Staff/Administration

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
The faculty and staff are very supportive and caring.	82%	18%
School staff members have made visits to my home.	20%	80%

- The majority of students (82%) agreed with the statement concerning the supportive nature of the staff, which was also reflected in the on-site interviews with students. Parent responses to this same question were somewhat higher at 95 percent.
- Very few of the students had actually received home visits from school personnel (20%), a statistic confirmed by parents.

### Students wrote the following comments on their surveys.

- “This staff at this school is like a family to me and I care about them very much and I think they feel the same about me.” (Spartanburg County Alternative school)
- [I like] “the way they [teachers] talk to us and explain stuff and break it down. [They] don’t give up on us.” (Greenville Alternative School Programs)

### Facilities/School Environment

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
My school is a very positive place.	65%	35%
I feel safe at this school.	71%	29%

- Students as well as parents were asked to consider the above statements. While 86 percent of the parents agreed with both statements, students rated both statements considerably less positively.
- Only two thirds of the students viewed their school setting as positive, and 71 percent feel safe in their school environment.

### Students wrote the following comments on their surveys.

- “Phoenix rocks!!”
- “I like Sonovista. I’d rather be here than anywhere else.”
- “This school’s fly.” (Givhans)
- “We need more security.” (Givhans)

### Curriculum/Academics

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
The classes are innovative, creative, and varied.	77%	23%
Opportunities have been made available for me to investigate jobs and careers based on my interest and aptitude for a particular career or skill.	73%	27%
Testing and evaluation of my academic performance has been fair and accurate.	88%	12%
An individualized learning plan was developed for me upon my entrance to the school.	72%	28%
Computers and other technology are readily available to students and are used to assist learning in a variety of ways.	84%	16%
I have been able to take the courses I need for promotion or graduation while at this school.	80%	20%
Tutoring has been available to me before, during, and after school.	50%	50%
I have been able to catch up or move ahead with learning and coursework while here.	83%	17%
Teaching and learning is primarily “hands-on” with opportunities for me to be active as I learn.	78%	22%

- Students and parents were asked to consider the same or similar statements. Parents were consistently more positive in their responses. Students rated statements regarding careers, computers and technology, and courses needed for promotion or graduation 12 to 13 percent lower.
- Seventy-seven percent of students viewed their classes as innovative, creative, and varied.
- Seventy-eight percent agreed that teaching and learning in the alternative school is primarily “hands on” and active.
- The weakest area in regard to academics in the students’ responses was in the area of available tutoring. Only 50 percent of the students feel they have the opportunity to receive tutoring at any time during the school day.

#### Students wrote the following comments on their surveys.

- “I feel the teacher should help his/her students more and the work on the computer should correspond with the textbook.” (Phoenix Academy).
- “I hate Novanet.” (Spartanburg County Alternative School.)
- “What I think will help this school is if we have the foreign language we need to graduate.” (Darlington County Intervention School).
- “More computers would help a lot and also better desks.” (Darlington County Intervention School).

### Other Areas

Statement	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
Having to provide my own transportation to and from school has not been a problem for my family or me.	74%	26%
I have been referred or provided support from outside agencies such as Mental Health or Social Services (leave blank if no outside services were needed or requested)	50%	50%
Community involvement at this school is encouraged.	71%	29%
I have had opportunities to be involved in service-learning at this school	68%	32%
My grade level is:	6-8: 174	9-12: 254
I have been at this school:	One semester or less: 238	Two semesters or more: 192

- Twenty-six percent of the students said transportation was an issue for their family. This was an increase of 5 percent over the parents' responses.
- Interestingly, students who chose to respond were evenly divided on whether they had received referrals or support from outside agencies. This was a considerable contrast to the parents' responses in which 80 percent of the parents agreed with this statement.
- Students rated community involvement and opportunities for service-learning items at 71 percent and 68 percent, respectively. However, very few schools were actually involved in service-learning. In service-learning, community service is tied to the curriculum. Many of the students were participating in community service rather than service-learning.

### Students wrote the following comments on their surveys.

Questions about food service and uniforms or dress codes were not on the surveys, but were written as comments. A number of students want to be able to wear regular clothes to school. The quality, quantity, and variety of food need to be improved according to many students.

### Staff Surveys

Staff at each school were asked to respond to eleven questions, three of which were open-ended and required a written response. Seven schools returned surveys, which included teachers, administrators, counselors, and support personnel such as secretaries, attendance clerks, teacher aids, counselor aids, nurses, school resource officers, and a JROTC instructor. The data extracted for teachers shows there are twenty-three male and forty-five female teachers at these schools. The degree levels include twenty-one with bachelors', thirty-two with masters', and two with a doctorate degree. Respondents were evenly divided on whether or not their teacher education program had prepared them to teach in an alternative school. Professional development is an important source of additional training for staff working in alternative schools. Eighty-three percent of the staff believed that the schools had provided programs that helped them to work more effectively with their students.

Responses to the question about adequate resources varied according to the school. Even those respondents answering “yes,” often qualified their answer by writing, “Yes, but we could always use more.” Needs identified included: science laboratories, current textbooks, teachers’ editions of textbooks and updated technology with computers in the classrooms. Additional teachers, teacher aides, and counselors were also identified as needs.

The three open-ended questions and the most common responses are below.

**Would you briefly describe what you consider to be the greatest challenge facing professionals at this school?**

- “I believe the greatest challenge is working with students who have given up on themselves. Many students have a great deal of family issues including dysfunctional family dynamics, drugs, alcohol, lack of education, etc.”
- “The ability to relate to and ‘control’ students who are initially angry, upset, and withdrawn.”
- “Many of our students have experienced failure so many times in their school years. It is a great challenge to get the students to think of themselves as capable of succeeding academically.”
- “Support services for the students’ multiple emotional, psychological and family issues.”
- “Sometimes our classrooms get over-crowded. Over 15 alternative ed. students in one classroom can be very challenging.”
- “Accommodating varied academic ability with behavioral issues”
- “Having adequate staff to truly address the needs of the students (e.g., low student/teacher ratio, counseling)”
- “Politics—district personnel do not understand our environment.”
- “Teaching our students proper social skills to prepare them to be educated—once they learn to settle down then teaching the skills becomes easier.”
- “Student and parent apathy and poor attendance”

**Would you briefly describe the “typical” student who is assigned to this alternative school?**

- Angry, disrespectful, low academic achievement: “Angry—hates school, but usually has future dreams of being successful and productive.”
- Single parent home: “Intelligent, clever, comes from a single parent household.”
- Self-control issues
- Lack of supervision
- Have adult responsibilities: “These are kids who operate as adults at home—our rules insult them.”



- Over age for grade: “A student that is bored in a normal school. This boredom results in their misbehaving and subsequently getting behind academically. This becomes a collapsing spiral of failure.”
- Low math and reading skills — “Many alternative education students are active and creative, but insecure in their academic performance. “
- No parental support
- No positive role models: “I think the typical student is an adolescent who has made a bad decision, and or is being negatively influenced by their peers or people in their community.”
- Education is a low priority: “Education is not a priority. Socialization is #1. No real future plans. Not much of a home life/guidance.”
- Low socioeconomic level: “Black male living with non-biological parent poverty level home environment, typically 4 years behind in reading & math level.”

**Would you briefly describe your teaching methods?**

- Interactive: “Differentiate as much as possible, by doing things that are interactive, visual, auditory, and self-guided. I have never had so many extremes in ability levels in one classroom.”
- Lecture: “10 percent lecture, 35 percent teacher demonstration; 25 percent group assignments; 30 percent independent work”
- Multiple learning styles: “Incorporate visual, audio, and kinesthetic methods when teaching students. I also use different methods for assessment such as projects and oral presentation allowing students to demonstrate learning.”
- Hands-on: “Hands on. I really like working one-on one with my students.”
- Small group: “Varied short lessons/activities, give students responsibility, discussion, small group”
- Projects: “I use a lot of technology and project based integrated units.”
- Facilitation: “I am the facilitator & tutor for my students who use a computer program to study their lessons.”
- Group discussion: “Processing events/behaviors with students individually and collectively.”
- One-on-one: “Online quizzes/tests. One on one.”
- Technology: “I am the facilitator & tutor for my students who use a computer program to study their lessons.
- Portfolios: “I use a combination of teaching strategies. A lot depends upon the type of student in the classroom. I have done portfolio, projects, and standard tests & quizzes. I’ve done whole and small group instruction.”
- Test/quizzes: “Traditional. Expect students to be responsible for their work/behavior. Use repetition tests and quizzes.”

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## APPENDIX A

### Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools Type 1

#### National Dropout Prevention Center Clemson University

This instrument is designed for practitioners to self-assess the effectiveness of their Type 1, comprehensive alternative school. The characteristics common to successful alternative schools are organized into ten categories. Under each category are indicators of best practices as identified through a search of the literature dealing with research-based initiatives for at-risk program development.

The respondent is directed to read each best practice indicator under the ten major categories and then check the degree of success to which that indicator has been met at their school. Respondents are instructed that their answers should be based on reliable sources of evidence (observation, discussion, documents, surveys, strategic plans, data, policy, etc.) The success scale is provided below.

Rudimentary	(Rud)	(1 Point)	Effort is minimal and performance is well below expected standard
Developing	(Dev)	(2 Points)	Performance is below expected standard but improving
Proficient	(Pro)	(3 Points)	Expected standard is met but is below highest capacity for success
Accomplished	(Acc)	(4 Points)	Exceeds expected standard and could be considered as a model to emulate
N/A	(N/A)	(0 Points)	Does not apply

After marking one degree of success for each indicator, the respondent is instructed to tally their scores and transfer the Grand Total to the Profile Summary Sheet (see below) to assist in visually assessing their school's effectiveness rating.

#### Student Accountability Measures

##### Quantitative Indicators

1.1	The dropout + suspension rate is lower than 20%
1.2	The average GPA is 2.0 or greater
1.3	The course completion rate is 85% or better
1.4	Average absences per student are less than 10 days per semester
1.5	Recidivism rate is less than 10% for returning students
1.6	Student attendance is greater than 95%

#### Administrative Structure and Policies

##### Clear Mission Statement and Purpose

2.1	Stakeholders know and can verbalize the school's mission and goals
2.2	Program objectives are measurable

### **Written Policies**

2.3	Discipline code is fair and equitably enforced
2.4	Attendance policy is flexible and designed to meet student needs
2.5	Admission procedures for students are written and adhered to
2.6	Exit procedures for student release reflect program philosophy and goals

### **Shared Decision-Making**

2.7	Stakeholders have an established process for providing input and receiving feedback
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## **Curriculum and Instruction**

### **Curricular Standards and Objectives**

3.1	The school ascribes to state curricular standards and objectives
3.2	Teacher lesson plans reflect state standards
3.3	Students are expected to read on grade level
3.4	Curriculum selection and use is not limited to print materials
3.5	Each student has a personalized learning plan
3.6	Course offerings are challenging and are designed to meet the needs of each student related to personal, social, emotional, behavioral, career development, as well as, basic core learning

### **Integrated Curriculum:**

3.6	Academic and career education components are integrated and contextualized to provide students with a range of problem solving and employability skills
3.7	Differentiated instruction is used in all content areas
3.8	Coursework is primarily hands-on, meaningful, and engaging to students
3.9	Work experience/career training is integrated into the curriculum

### **Technology**

3.10	Computers and appropriate software are readily available in each classroom
3.11	Teachers consistently integrate technology into the curriculum

### **Mentoring and Tutoring**

3.12	An organized adult one-to-one mentoring program is in place
3.13	Individual tutoring, one-to-one instruction, and small group instruction are prevalent in each classroom

### **Teaching and Learning Atmosphere**

3.14	Teachers are creative and flexible in course development and implementation
3.15	Academics are a key component of the program goals and objectives
3.16	There are few interruptions that interfere with teaching and learning
3.17	Teachers are perceived as caring. Their classrooms are places where students trust and feel safe enough to learn
3.18	Class size does not exceed 10 students per teacher
3.19	Each teacher has an assigned teaching assistant at least 50% of the day that works directly with students

**Level of Student Involvement**

3.20	Students are taught to be self-directed
3.21	Students have opportunities to engage in the school's decision-making process

**Assessment of Learning**

3.22	Standardized test results are used to make needed curriculum changes
3.23	Alternative methods of assessment are used (i.e., portfolio, oral, visual)
3.24	Rewards and incentives for academic excellence are evident in each classroom and school-wide

**Educational Options**

3.25	Student accommodations and adaptations are evident
3.26	Extracurricular activities are available
3.27	Enrichment activities are available
3.28	Opportunities for accelerated learning are available
3.29	Service-learning is employed school-wide

**Faculty and Staff****Qualifications**

4.1	All faculty are properly certified for the area(s) they teach
4.2	All staff are thoroughly screened regarding their desire to work with at-risk students
4.3	All faculty and staff are voluntarily assigned
4.4	New faculty and staff are provided with a thorough orientation prior to beginning their assignment
4.5	Inexperienced teachers are assigned a professional mentor

**Professional Development Activities**

4.6	Training related to at-risk students is on-going
4.7	Each staff member has an individualized professional development plan
4.8	Staff members regularly attend and make presentations at conferences and workshops
4.9	The school provides professional organization membership for staff
4.10	Faculty and staff have access to a comprehensive professional library

**Classroom Management and Teaching Methodology**

4.11	All teachers exhibit effective classroom management practices
4.12	Behavior management is positive in nature rather than punitive
4.13	Individualized behavioral interventions are used
4.14	Varied strategies are used to address student learning styles

**Facilities and Grounds****School Plant**

5.1	School is clean and well maintained
5.2	School is adequate for services provided.
5.3	School is attractive and inviting
5.4	School accommodates disabled students, staff, and community members



5.5	School location is readily accessible to all students in the district
5.6	School size is limited to no more than 250 students

### **School Leadership**

#### **Principal and Assistant(s)**

6.1	School administrators are good managers of personnel and resources
6.2	Principal is viewed as an effective and knowledgeable instructional leader
6.3	Administrators react well during times of crises
6.4	Principal has strong political leadership skills
6.5	Principal is effective in recruiting and retaining quality staff

### **Student Support Services**

#### **Food Service**

7.1	Food services are provided near or within the school
7.2	Meals reflect high-quality nutrition and accommodates student needs

#### **Citizenship, Conduct, and Social and Health Issues**

7.3	Personal and behavioral management instruction is integrated throughout the curriculum
7.4	Drug/alcohol prevention and treatment is readily available
7.5	Conflict management instruction is ongoing
7.6	Effective parenting skills instruction is provided
7.7	Assistance with accessing social and health services is provided
7.8	Child care is provided for students (as appropriate)

#### **Student Counseling**

7.8	Each student is assigned a personal counselor
7.9	Career counseling is included as a major academic component
7.10	Guidance and counseling are integral components of the curriculum and are comprehensive in nature and structure
7.11	Counselors have a high degree of flexibility to address student needs
7.12	Students are monitored and supported after returning to home school

#### **Transportation of Students**

7.13	Transportation is provided at no cost to students
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### **Learning Community (Staff, Students, Parents, and Community)**

#### **Family Involvement**

8.1	Formal and informal parent/teacher conferences are conducted on a regular schedule
8.2	The school has an active parent involvement organization
8.3	Family activities are regularly scheduled
8.4	Family counseling is available
8.6	Regular home visits are made by staff

**Community Involvement**

8.7	Active local advisory board is in place
8.8	Mentoring/apprenticeship opportunities are sought for students
8.9	Community volunteer opportunities are available

**Students**

8.10	A comprehensive student orientation process is in place
8.11	Family members are required to attend orientation

**Communication**

8.12	There is effective communication between administration and staff
8.13	- between alternative school and feeder schools
8.14	- between school and parents
8.15	- between school and community
8.16	- between school and students

**Program Funding****Adequate School Budget to:**

9.1	Administer the instructional program
9.2	Maintain the school plant
9.3	Provide an effective discipline program
9.4	Provide an effective staff development program
9.5	Provide for effective curriculum development
9.6	Provide for the development and maintenance of technology
9.7	Provide an effective guidance program
9.8	Provide staff and student incentives
9.9	Provide student support services
9.10	Provide for effective student assessment
9.11	Provide for a comprehensive annual program evaluation

**School Climate****Ethos of the School**

10.1	Characterized by a culture of concern and caring
10.2	Positive relationships exist between students and teachers
10.3	Student diversity is evident
10.4	A safe environment is evident
10.5	All staff share the expectation that all students can learn and have worth
10.6	Equity in terms of learning is evident
10.7	Students are expected to behave according to established, fairly executed rules of conduct
10.8	All staff, students, and parents are treated with respect and dignity

The grand totals for each major category are then transferred to the *Profile Summary Sheet* on the next page.

### Profile Summary Sheet

Respondents are instructed to shade in the appropriate area corresponding to the Grand Total for each category. This provides a visual assessment of the school's effectiveness rating.

#### Student Accountability Measures

Rudimentary (0-6)	Developing (7-12)	Proficient (13-18)	Accomplished (19-24)

#### Administrative Structure and Policies

Rudimentary (0-8)	Developing (9-16)	Proficient (17-24)	Accomplished (25-32)

#### Curriculum and Instruction

Rudimentary (0-32)	Developing (33-64)	Proficient (65-96)	Accomplished (97-128)

#### Faculty and Staff

Rudimentary (0-14)	Developing (15-28)	Proficient (29-42)	Accomplished (43-56)

#### Facilities and Grounds

Rudimentary (0-7)	Developing (8-14)	Proficient (15-21)	Accomplished (22-28)

#### School Leadership

Rudimentary (0-5)	Developing (6-10)	Proficient (11-15)	Accomplished (16-20)

#### Student Support Services

Rudimentary (0-14)	Developing (15-28)	Proficient (29-42)	Accomplished (43-56)

#### Learning Community

Rudimentary (0-16)	Developing (17-32)	Proficient (33-48)	Accomplished (49-64)

#### Program Funding

Rudimentary (0-11)	Developing (12-22)	Proficient (23-33)	Accomplished (33-44)

#### School Climate

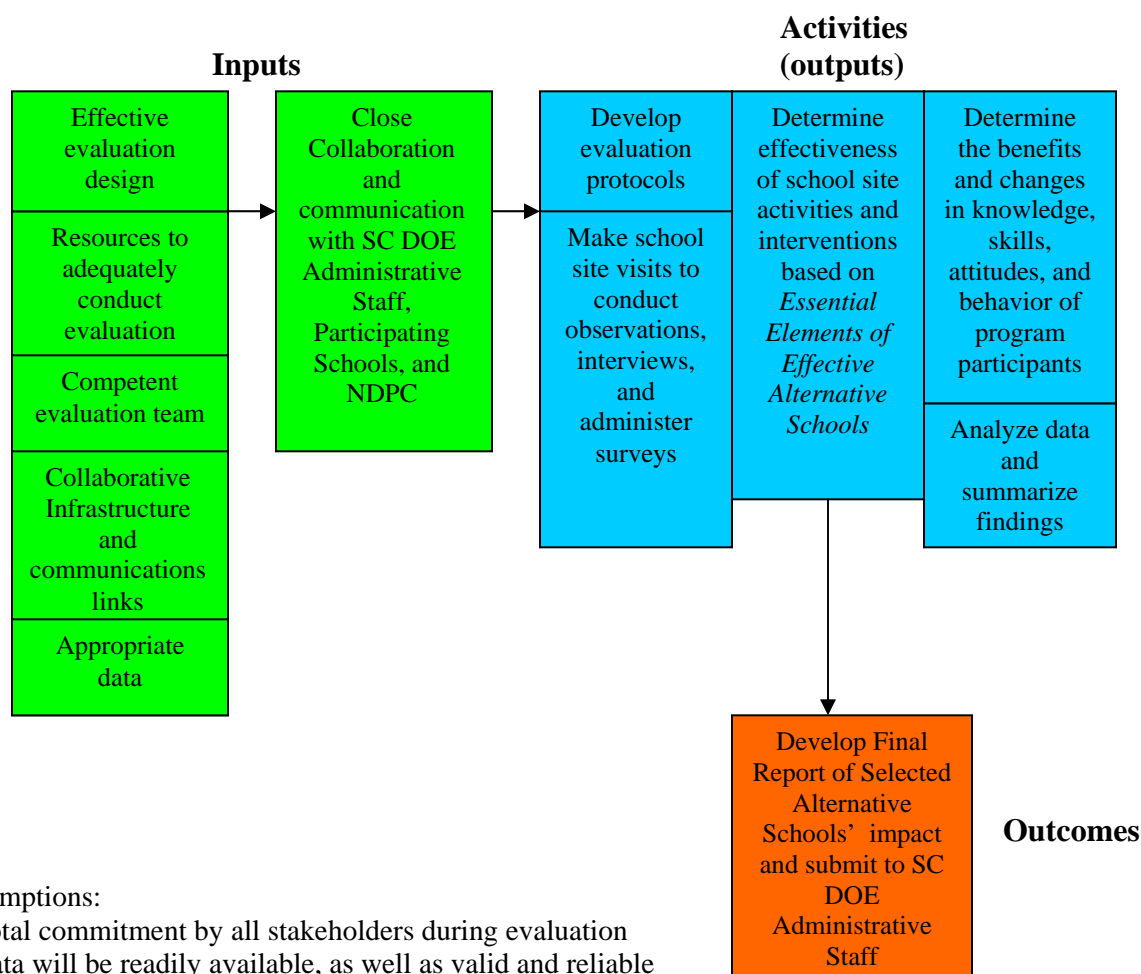
Rudimentary (0-8)	Developing (9-16)	Proficient (17-24)	Accomplished (25-32)

## APPENDIX B

### EVALUATION LOGIC MODEL FOR SCDE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM EVALUATION

What do we want to know?

- ❑ An understanding of the process of activity implementation to include: program context and infrastructure, staff training, collaboration initiatives, data support systems, and participant satisfaction.
- ❑ What is the effectiveness, or impact, in relation to the purpose, goals, and objectives, for selected alternative schools?
- ❑ How effective are selected alternative schools in relation to *Essential Elements of Effective Alternative Schools*?



Assumptions:

1. Total commitment by all stakeholders during evaluation
2. Data will be readily available, as well as valid and reliable
3. Resources will be available to conduct evaluation activities
4. Evaluation findings will guide needed program changes
5. Local political considerations will not interfere with evaluation activities, findings, or recommendations.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STAFF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

#### **Principal**

1. Describe for me your understanding of the mission and purpose of your program.
2. What special skills or experiences prepared you for this job?
3. Describe the process for a student to be assigned to this school?
4. What process is in place for associate school principals to be kept informed about the progress of their students assigned to the alternative school?
5. Describe the process for students to return to their home school from your school.  
Do you have a voice in whether or not they are allowed to return?
6. What transition, accommodations, adaptations and/or intervention strategies are in place for students who return from your program?
7. What type of adjustment problems have been evident for returning students?
8. If a student does not adjust well upon his/her return to the home school, what happens?
9. What types of staff development activities have been provided to your staff during the past two to three years?
10. Is your program effective? What might make it more effective?
11. What do you perceive are the strengths and weaknesses of the school?
12. Is there an assigned quota for the number of students that can be referred each year to the alternative school? Do you have data on how many were referred from each associate school?
13. How many times have associate school principals visited the alternative school this school year? \_\_\_\_\_
14. How many students have been referred to the alternative school this school year? \_\_\_\_\_
15. What is your estimate of the percentage of students returning to their home school from the alternative school who are successful and go on to graduate? \_\_\_\_\_
16. Describe how you handle various discipline problems you are faced with daily.
17. Do you have all the resources needed to help this school achieve its goals and objectives?
18. Describe your vision of an ideal teacher for this school? What is the teacher turnover rate?
19. How is technology integrated into the curriculum?
20. Describe how you accommodate the varying needs and learning styles of your students.
21. Describe the most difficult situation you have faced at this school and how you handled it.
22. How do you encourage family/community involvement at this school?

23. Describe your political leadership capacity?
24. What is your vision for this school five years down the road?
25. What questions do you have for us?

### **School Counselor**

1. What do you perceive is the primary mission and function of the alternative school?
2. Describe your role and responsibilities as a counselor.
3. What special qualifications do you possess or what experiences have you had to prepare you for this position?
4. Describe a typical day for you at the alternative school.
5. What are the primary “at-risk” intervention strategies employed with students at this school?
6. What specific intervention strategies are in place for students who exhibit
  - chronic misbehavior
  - anti-social behavior
  - aggression/violence
  - sexual deviance
  - drug/alcohol dependency
  - depression
  - eating disorders/obesity
  - signs of sexual abuse
  - other
7. What intervention strategies dealing with truancy are in place at the school?
8. Describe what process is in place to handle crisis and/or emergencies.
9. Is there an organized, structured mentoring program in place for students? Describe.
10. What about tutoring? Is it available before or after school? Is it structured/organized?
11. What type of enrichment or accelerated learning activities are available for students?
12. How does the school adapt to or accommodate the needs of special students?
13. How do you collaborate with other staff members in meeting the needs of students?
14. Is there a psycho/social screening process in place for new students? Describe.
15. What programmatic/analytical records are kept on individual students?
16. How are the feeder schools kept informed about the progress of their students assigned to the alternative school?
17. Describe any follow-up activities performed by the Counseling/administrative/teaching staff for students who return to their “regular” school from the alternative school.
18. How do you determine when a student is ready to be returned to his/her feeder school?
19. Describe what type of parent involvement program is in place at the alternative school.

20. How would you describe the communications links between
  - school and parents
  - school and community
  - administration and staff
  - the alternative school and feeder schools
21. Is this school effective? How? What two or three improvements would you make if you were leading the school?
22. Is this school characterized by a culture of concern and caring? Explain.
23. What do you consider to be the greatest needs of this school?
24. Is career development for students a function of your role as a counselor here?
25. How is career development and employability skill development integrated into the curriculum?
26. Which outside agencies regularly work with students at the alternative school? Describe the referral process.
27. Do you have a specific budget to administer the guidance program?

### **Teacher**

1. Describe how you came to be assigned to the alternative school?
2. What relevant experience, expertise, etc. particularly qualifies you as a teacher in this school?
3. What do you believe is the mission of this school?
4. What types of staff development have you had over the past 2–3 years?
5. What is the predominant teaching style at this school?
6. How are individual student needs addressed?
7. What are the typical discipline problems you face and how are they handled?
8. What support services are available for students?
9. Is there a formal process in place to communicate or visit with parents/guardians? Describe.
10. How do you assess the improvement of students, both academically and behaviorally?
11. How are students encouraged at this school?
12. What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of this school?
13. Is participatory decision-making practiced in this school? Explain.
14. If you could change one thing at this school, what would it be?

### **Alternative School Students**

1. Describe for me how this school has helped you to address or correct the problems that got you here?
2. What is a typical day like here at the alternative school?
3. Is this school challenging you academically?
4. Do you think as a result of being at this school you will be a better student upon your return to your home school?
5. What are some of the positives of being at this school?
6. What changes would you make to this school if you were in charge?
7. Do you receive individual counseling or other special services?
8. Do you receive individual tutoring in the areas you are academically weak?
9. In your opinion, is the school staff warm, caring, and concerned about you personally and the problems you face in school and life?
10. Have your parents been kept informed about your progress here at the alternative school?  
Has anyone visited your home?
11. How is discipline handled here?



## APPENDIX D

### Alternative School Survey Forms

#### Student Survey

The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University is seeking your input to help us evaluate your school. Your opinion is valued and will be used to help improve South Carolina's alternative school programs. Please note that no one will read your responses except staff members at the National Dropout Prevention Center.

For every item below, mark an X over the letters in the scales to the right to show the strength of your feelings about that topic. The rating system allows you a range of responses from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree".

SA	A	U	D	SD
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Example:

I really enjoy this school

*(This response indicates that you are enthusiastic about being at you school.)*

Begin the questionnaire here:

	<del>SA</del> A U D SD
1. School admission procedures and rules were fully explained to my parents and me before I was admitted.	SA A U D SD
2. I believe the discipline code is fair and is enforced the same for all students.	SA A U D SD
3. The classes here are innovative, creative, and varied.	SA A U D SD
4. The faculty and staff are very supportive and caring.	SA A U D SD
5. Opportunities are available for me to investigate jobs and careers based on my interest and aptitude for a particular career or skills.	SA A U D SD
6. The building and grounds are attractive and are adequate to meet the needs of students and faculty.	SA A U D SD
7. My self-esteem has improved as a result of attending this school.	SA A U D SD
8. The school has high standards and expectations for students.	SA A U D SD
9. Testing and evaluation of my academic performance has been fair and accurate.	SA A U D SD
10. Having to provide my own transportation to and from school has not been a problem for my family or me.	SA A U D SD
11. I have received excellent counseling services while at my school.	SA A U D SD

12. Attitudes of my family toward me have become more positive as a result of my experiences here.	SA	A	U	D	SD
13. I have been encouraged to attend additional education/training beyond high school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
14. An individualized learning plan was developed for me upon my entrance to the school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
15. Computers and other technology are readily available to students and are used to assist learning in a variety of ways.	SA	A	U	D	SD
16. I have been able to take the courses I need for promotion or graduation while at this school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
17. Tutoring has been available to me before, during, and after school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
18. This school is a very positive place.	SA	A	U	D	SD
19. I have been able to catch up or move ahead with learning and coursework while here.	SA	A	U	D	SD
20. School staff members have made visits to my home.	SA	A	U	D	SD
21. Behavior problems are handled fairly and effectively.	SA	A	U	D	SD
22. Teaching and learning is primarily "hands-on" with opportunities for me to be active as I learn.	SA	A	U	D	SD
23. I am more likely to graduate from high school as a result of my attendance at this school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
24. I have been assigned an adult mentor.	SA	A	U	D	SD
25. I have been referred or provided support from outside agencies such as Mental Health or Social Services (leave blank if no outside services were needed or requested)	SA	A	U	D	SD
26. Community involvement at this school is encouraged.	SA	A	U	D	SD
27. I have been encouraged to think independently and to seek more freedom and responsibility at this school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
28. I feel safe at this school	SA	A	U	D	SD
29. I have had opportunities to be involved in service-learning at this school	SA	A	U	D	SD
30. My grade level is:	6-8		9-12		
31. I have been at this school:	One semester or less		Two semesters or more		

**Please provide any additional comments you think will help to improve this school.**  
(use back of page if more space is required)

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Thank you for helping us gather information for our evaluation. Please return this to your teacher after sealing it in the envelope provided to you.

## Parent Survey

The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University is seeking your input to help us evaluate your school. Your opinions are valued and will be used to help improve South Carolina's alternative school program. Please note that no one will read your responses except staff members at the National Dropout Prevention Center.

For every item below, mark an X over the letters in the scales to the right to show the strength of your feelings about that topic. The rating system allows you a range of responses from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree".

SA	A	U	D	SD
Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

**Example:**

My child really enjoys this school

*(This response indicates that your child is enthusiastic about being at this school.)*

~~SA~~ A U D SD

**Begin the questionnaire here:**

1. School admission procedures and rules were fully explained to my child and me before he/she was admitted.	SA A U D SD
2. I believe the discipline code is fair and is enforced the same for all students.	SA A U D SD
3. The school is meeting the needs of my child that were not being met at his/her regular school.	SA A U D SD
4. The faculty and staff are very supportive and caring.	SA A U D SD
5. Opportunities have been made available for my child to investigate jobs and careers based on his/her interest and aptitude for a particular career or skills.	SA A U D SD
6. The building and grounds are attractive and are adequate to meet the needs of students and faculty.	SA A U D SD
7. I believe my child has turned his/her life around since attending the Alternative Academy for Success.	SA A U D SD
8. The school has high standards and expectations for students.	SA A U D SD
9. Testing and evaluation of my child's academic performance has been fair and accurate.	SA A U D SD
10. Having to provide transportation to and from school has not been a problem for our family.	SA A U D SD
11. I believe my child has received excellent counseling services while at this school	SA A U D SD
12. I feel welcome at this school.	SA A U D SD

13. Communication between the school and my home has been excellent.	SA	A	U	D	SD
14. The school has provided for parental input into policies and decisions.	SA	A	U	D	SD
15. Computers and other technology are readily available to students and are used to assist learning in a variety of ways.	SA	A	U	D	SD
16. My child has been able to take the courses he/she needs for promotion or graduation while at this school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
17. I believe the school has effective leadership.	SA	A	U	D	SD
18. This school is a very positive place.	SA	A	U	D	SD
19. My child has been able to catch up or move ahead with learning and coursework while here.	SA	A	U	D	SD
20. School staff have made visits to my home.	SA	A	U	D	SD
21. Teachers discipline students fairly.	SA	A	U	D	SD
22. My child brings home a report card that contains clear information about his/her progress.	SA	A	U	D	SD
23. My child is more likely to graduate from high school as a result of his/her attendance at this school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
24. I am satisfied with the education my child has received at this school..	SA	A	U	D	SD
25. My child was referred or provided support from outside agency such as Mental Health or Social Services (leave blank if no outside services were needed or requested)	SA	A	U	D	SD
26. I understand the mission of this school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
27. I believe the school is doing a good job following its mission.	SA	A	U	D	SD
28. I believe my child is safe at this school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
29. I have made ____ visits to the school for conferences, observing teachers, observing my child, etc.	1-4		5-10		
30. My child's grade level is:	6-8		9-12		
31. My child has been at this school.	One semester or less		Two semesters or more		

**Please provide any additional comments you think will help to improve this school.**  
(use back of page if more space is required)

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Thank you for helping us gather information for our evaluation. Please return this to your child's teacher after sealing it in the envelope provided to you.

## Alternative School Professional Staff Survey

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) is seeking your input to help us evaluate your school. Your opinions are valued and will be used to help improve South Carolina's alternative school program. Please note that no one will read your responses except the evaluation team members.

1. Male\_\_\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_\_\_

2. What is the highest academic degree you have attained?

\_\_\_\_\_B.A. or B.S.    \_\_\_\_\_M.A. or M.S.    \_\_\_\_\_Ph.D. or Ed.D.

3. How many years have you been employed in each of the following educational capacities?

Teacher.....\_\_\_\_\_year(s)

Principal or School Administrator.....\_\_\_\_\_year(s)

School Counselor.....\_\_\_\_\_year(s)

Social Worker.....\_\_\_\_\_year(s)

Other (specify).....\_\_\_\_\_year(s)

4. How many years have you been employed in what you would define as an "alternative" school or program? \_\_\_\_\_year(s)

5. In what capacity are you currently employed in alternative education?

\_\_\_\_\_ Teacher

\_\_\_\_\_ Principal or Administrator

\_\_\_\_\_ School Counselor

\_\_\_\_\_ Social Worker

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (specify)\_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you believe the pre-service teacher training you received adequately prepared you to teach in an alternative school environment?    \_\_\_\_\_Yes    \_\_\_\_\_No

7. Do you believe that the in-service or professional development programs you have had while at the alternative school have been effective in preparing you to work with alternative school students?    \_\_\_\_\_Yes    \_\_\_\_\_No

8. Would you briefly describe what you consider to be the greatest challenge facing professionals at this school?

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9. Would you briefly describe your teaching methods?

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10. Could you briefly describe the “typical” student who is assigned to this alternative school?

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11. Do you have adequate resources to meet the needs of the curriculum and the needs of students?      \_\_\_\_\_Yes      \_\_\_\_\_No

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